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The Pain, Hunger, and Birth of Epiphany in the Novels of Toni Morrison

By

Cristina D'Imperio

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Abstract

The thesis, entitled *The Pain, Hunger, and Birth of Epiphany in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, is divided into three chapters. The introduction discusses some of the traditional uses of the word “epiphany” in literature and then proceeds to define the ways in which Morrison’s characters experience epiphanical journeys. Furthermore, Morrison’s development of the idea plays a fundamental role in the structure and unification of all of her novels.

The first chapter compares the texts *Love* and *Sula* and charts the progression of pain from external, communal, and inherited to internal, individual, and isolationist. In both *Love* and *Sula*, death and the body are irrelevant, and it is only when characters learn to dispel pain and disregard the body that they can truly experience an epiphany. Chapter two discusses *Paradise* in detail and describes the role of food in allowing or preventing characters’ spiritual awakenings or transcendence. Food and the way it is consumed, prepared, grown, and perceived are inextricably linked to characters’ journeys to epiphany. The third chapter compares the novels *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon* and illustrates the ways in which perceptions of pain and food are translated to younger generations. It also raises questions of generational sterility and degeneration as well as conveys ideas of stunted or aborted growth and truncated epiphanies.

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Introduction: Illustrations of Epiphany

There is a conflict between public and private life and it's a conflict that I think ought to remain a conflict. [...] Because they are two modes of life that exist to exclude and annihilate each other. It's a conflict that should be maintained now more than ever because the social machinery of this country at this time doesn't permit harmony in a life that has both aspects. [...] There must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative *of* the tribe and *in* it [...]. There were spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community. (*What Moves at the Margin* 56)

Toni Morrison's words are simultaneously statement, query, and longing, and the adamancy of her opening lines belies the nostalgia of her closing ones. She conveys a conflict between inward and outward lives and the difficulty of maintaining individuality within a larger community. Her statement further describes a dilemma of isolation and a need for integration between an artist, her community, and the form, or "individual expression", of her work. It questions one's ability, not only to achieve a unity between such states, but to find a space in which to achieve it. It is this unity, or desire for a missing wholeness, that also permeates Morrison's fictional work and encompasses all of her novels. Her efforts to express her voice, to represent small neighborhoods as well as the wider world, and to remain both an individual and a part of the community, are further mirrored in many of her characters. They too struggle to integrate their physical, mental, and even spiritual states into the spaces and places offered by artist, reader, and the fictional community.

In terms of her art and characters, Morrison's words also contain a sense of violence and a dream-like desire for inclusion, and the phrase "exist to exclude and annihilate each other" is exemplified in her characters' struggles to belong. Frequently

in her novels, private desires or motivations conflict with public opinion, and, similarly, societal or communal values are not always those of the individual. However, the phrase, “spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community”, illustrates not only a nostalgic loss of the potential to belong but also the tenuous, denied longing for a space in which to achieve such a harmony. In Morrison’s novels and in this thesis, the flux, fragmentation, and isolation that exists between individuals and the external world is expressed through her portrayals of pain, food, and sterility, and with each topic, she illustrates the relationships that exist between body and mind and society, community, and the individual. Morrison, however, does provide some of her protagonists with the chance to attain the wholeness she feels she is denied. Through epiphanical experiences of acceptance, salvation, and reconciliation, achieved in mental and physical spaces that are completely their own, some of her characters are able to be both an individual and to create a meaningful connection with another.

Defining the Epiphanical Experience

An “epiphanical experience” or epiphany originated religiously, and refers in Christianity to the manifestation of Christ to the Magi as the Son of God. This manifestation of Christ is celebrated on either the sixth or nineteenth of January or during what is known as the Season of the Epiphany. In more general religious terms, “epiphany” can also refer to the manifestation of a divine or supernatural being. In literature, however, the term more loosely refers to an unintentional sudden realization, potentially where parts have amalgamated into an inspiring whole. For James Joyce, who popularized the specific use of the term in literature, especially in *A Portrait of the*

Artist as a Young Man and *Dubliners*, epiphany becomes a life-changing experience for his characters, after which they achieve a new awareness of their personal, social, religious, or political situations. Joyce is not the only Modernist to employ the term, and Virginia Woolf viewed such a realization as a “moment of being.” T.S. Eliot, too, described an epiphanical experience as an “unattended moment.” The main similarity between the Modernist definitions and portrayals of the concept is the view that it is the responsibility of the artist to record and render meaning from the epiphany. By taking responsibility for the recording of such moments, the authorial voice is able to provide artistic guidance in a world otherwise comprised of chaos.

The Modernist definitions of epiphany, however, differ from both their Romantic predecessors and their Post-modernist successors. For Romantics such as Wordsworth, an epiphany occurs as something inspired or triggered by nature. The external, natural world, rather than being urban or chaotic, is presented as sublime. Morrison, however, incorporates a variety of religious, Romantic, and Modernist notions of epiphany into her work and makes the concept her own. For Morrison, epiphany is fluid, and it is not necessarily permanently life-changing or redemptive in a traditional sense. Her characters’ epiphanies are ambiguous and vulnerable. They are also Post-modernist in the sense that they do not always provide positive meaning in a chaotic or natural world, and the artist or narrator is frequently unable to offer guidance to readers or characters. For Morrison, too, her characters’ journeys to epiphany become as important as the epiphany itself, and through their experiences, Morrison establishes both the all-consuming nature of the body as well as its irrelevance. She further highlights connections and disparities between body and mind, and epiphany and the journey to it

become about the need to create harmony between body, mind, and soul. It is not enough, however, for Morrison's characters simply to have personal, self-contained epiphanies or journeys, and they struggle to find a "space and place" for themselves in the world around them.

Additionally, Morrison's portrayals of epiphanical experiences often involve fragments amalgamating into a whole or dissolving completely in moments where characters are simultaneously themselves and a part of something larger than themselves. For some protagonists in chapter one, such as Sula and Nel in *Sula* or Heed and Christine in *Love*, epiphany involves the unity and acceptance found in non-judgmental friendship where the forms of pain that have usurped their lives can be identified and dissolved. For others, such as the women in *Paradise* in chapter two, a salvational epiphany is achieved through community and food where the women learn how to nourish their bodies, minds, and souls. And finally, in novels such as *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz* in chapter three, epiphany is questionable, vulnerable, and frequently false. The sterility inherent in characters' lives results in an inability to connect with family members or to reproduce. While characters appear to achieve a reconciliation between the past and the present, they often accomplish it at the expense of the future.

Various reflections on epiphany in literature also help to identify some of the ways in which Morrison uses the concept. Martin Bidney defines epiphany in part as the moment when "one's feeling of aliveness intensifies and the senses quicken" (1), and he believes "a literary epiphany, then, is a moment that is felt to be expansive, mysterious, and intense" (3). His further claims of epiphany being composed of "elements, motions, and/ or shapes" (5) also pertain to chapter one's discussion of *Sula* and *Love*. The

epiphanies that the women experience are sudden and intense, and they frequently involve the dissolution of “shapes”, or forms, as well as an amalgamation of the senses. For example, Sula’s epiphany involves the dissolution of a variety of types of “throbbing” and “wave”-like pain (*Sula* 148), and Nel’s final epiphany describes the “scattering” of “a soft ball of fur” (174). There is also mysteriousness in Heed and Christine’s moment of acceptance at the end of *Love* as they contemplate life, death, a forged will, and the “intense” smell of baking cinnamon bread (*Love* 177).

Ashton Nichols claims that epiphany is also “atemporal” (28), or as Bidney summarizes, “the epiphanic moment [...] transcends its momentariness either by transforming the past or by seeming to point beyond itself during the moment it appears” (3). Nichols’s statement of “atemporality” pertains to all three chapters. In *Sula*, *Love*, and *Paradise*, discussed in chapters one and two, epiphany sometimes occurs outside of time in a space where death and the body do not matter. For instance, the Convent women in *Paradise* heal and nourish themselves, then die and are reborn. In chapter three, characters struggle to move beyond the confines of time and the past in order to achieve a reconciliation; however, they are largely unsuccessful and the reconciliation that occurs between the past and the present does not allow for the possibility of a future.

Nichols’s claim that “the epiphany is always threatened by failure because of its fleeting nature” (112) is also true for characters in *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon* in chapter three. For instance, as Milkman hurriedly “leaps” from the cliff at the end of *Song of Solomon*, he has little time to digest his insight that “without ever leaving the ground, [Pilate] could fly” (336). Morris Beja’s notion of a “retrospective epiphany” that is “one in which an event arouses no special impression when it occurs but produces a sensation

of new awareness where it is recalled at some future time” (15) is especially true of *Jazz*. As characters recall stories and events from the past, they attempt to relive or imitate them in the present. However, as Wim Tigges notes, “‘the past recaptured’ [...] is to be distinguished from voluntary and intentional recollection” (12). In *Jazz*, voluntary and involuntary recollection is intertwined. As characters obsess over the past, their stories are involuntarily and uncontrollably interrupted by the narrator’s own preoccupation with the past.

As well as literary criticism on epiphany, it is also helpful to look closely at a few authors who clarify its application in the following chapters and whose uses of epiphany help to trace the concept from Romanticism to Modernism. In “Tintern Abbey”, Wordsworth, as previously mentioned, presents a notion of epiphany that is entangled with ideas of the sublime. He composes the poem after returning from a second visit to the ruins of the Abbey with his sister, and compares his present experience to one from years earlier. He notes the differences between his reactions, and comments on the physicality, or “appetite” (80) of his earlier experience in comparison to the more sensory or “sublime” (37) reactions to his recent visit. The combination of past and present sensations, along with views of nature, the clarity of his perceptions, his sister’s company, and a longing to regain lost time, culminate in epiphany:

That blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery
In which the heavy and weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened: [...]
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood

Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. (37-49)

Wordsworth's epiphany occurs, not during his solitary first visit to the Abbey, but upon reflection of his second visit with his sister Dorothy. His body becomes irrelevant even as his perceptions become more acute. Nature is inspiring, death is meaningless, and suddenly the trivialities of a physical life no longer matter. He has found a connection with his inner self, with his soul, with his sister, and with the world around him, and Wordsworth's experience can be likened to those of Sula and Nel in *Sula* and Heed and Christine in *Love*.

It can be said that Wordsworth, as well as all four women, experiences, as Mark Sandy states, an epiphany of "personal, familial, societal, and transcendental loss" (36). In *Sula*, the women's ultimate epiphanies of acceptance, where pain is identified and dissolved, do not occur until after Sula's death. For Sula, epiphany takes place away from all "distractions" and others' perspectives where she feels she finally has the peace of mind to examine her own "perception of things" (55). As she unravels the "mysteries" of her life, she too reaches the startling conclusion that all of the bodily sensations with which she was previously enamored, including the sensations of pain on her deathbed, are meaningless and "just something to do" (147). Rather than being inspired by any bodily sensation Sula, like Wordsworth, is inspired by her own thoughts, which revolve around the past and her friendship with Nel.

Nel's epiphany, too, which occurs years later, is also inspired by her friendship with Sula and a reflection on the past. Outside and surrounded by "overripe green

things” (108), Nel’s epiphany culminates in overwhelming and heightened sensations followed by a sorrowful cry lamenting her friend’s death and the time they have lost. Despite both women’s seemingly solitary experiences, their epiphanies, regardless of death, are triggered by sensations of the other’s presence. They have only been able to identify or dissolve their pain because of the acceptance they have received from another, and as Gloria Naylor claims, they achieve “a spiritual bonding that transcend[s] the flesh” (200). Morrison’s portrayals of epiphany differ from Wordsworth’s, however, in that both Sula’s and Nel’s epiphanies occur after Sula’s death. The “life-changing” aspects of epiphany then become questionable. Instead, epiphany becomes about the acceptance of another, as well as the recognition of the loss of pain, of life, and of time. Both artist and narrator appear helpless to present a solution as to how or where such a realization can find its place in the world. The implication for Morrison’s characters in *Sula* is that they achieve acceptance and epiphany in their very own “spaces and places.”

While Nel and Sula’s epiphanies are pervaded with thoughts of each other, Christine and Heed in *Love* have a mutual experience in each other’s company. They too reflect on the events of the past that have both solidified and fragmented their friendship. Scenes of acceptance occurring on a beach are contrasted with the abuse surrounding a picnic, and through conversation and each other’s company, the women realize that they have spent painful years looking for the meaning of love in the wrong places. They also mourn the time they have lost, but as their conversation continues after Heed’s death, it is clear that for them, as well as Nel, Sula, and Wordsworth, that the body is irrelevant and that having another with whom to share one’s experiences affords levels of meaning that were previously unattainable. Discussing pain and

transcendence, Kristin Boudreau compares what she terms the “blues tradition” with the “Romantic tradition”, and she claims:

The blues articulation, then, expands into a public realm that had hitherto been a private experience of suffering, taking an individual outside of himself and his private pains, which might otherwise make the self so achingly present that the world disappears. Romantic treatments of emotion, on the other hand, depend upon “recollect[ion] in tranquility” [...] which requires privacy for the sake of contemplation. (449)

Quoting Wordsworth, Boudreau notes differences in focusing on “the importance of pain” in order to make “efforts at transcendence” (448). In terms of *Sula* and *Love*, Morrison allows both sets of women to eradicate and acknowledge their pain in a space that is uniquely their own. Adopting the blues, Romantic, and Post-modernist “traditions”, Morrison depicts experiencing epiphany in the company of another as her characters reflect on pain, life, and friendship.

While the type of epiphany chapter one discusses involves acceptance and a coming together of one’s own perceptions, rendering death, pain, and the body irrelevant, chapter two involves salvation. In *Paradise*, women who have begun to “drift” find their way, broken and hungry, to an old Convent (222). Once there, they meet Connie, who is equally desolate. Eventually, all of the women residing at the Convent manage to merge their malnourished minds and bodies and are saved by Connie. Before their salvation, however, Connie must heal herself, and her experiences are not unlike Edna Pontellier’s in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. In brief, in *The Awakening*, Edna struggles to find a place for her newly emerging sense of self in the world around her, and “a certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her - the light which, showing the way, forbids it” (14). Edna’s “awakening” is bittersweet, and her

epiphany involves insight not only into herself but into the seeming impossibility of finding a “space or place” for that self in the world around her. In *Paradise*, Connie too, experiences the “light”, or as Sidney Feshbach terms “the radiance” (304), of epiphany in a “sunshot” that “sears” one of her eyes (*Paradise* 241). As she physically starts to go blind, she gradually begins to gain a spiritual “in-sight” into those around her. But for Connie, as with Edna, these newfound perceptions of self and ability cause fear and are difficult to merge with the external world.

Eventually for Edna, the possibility of a new life presented by the “light” or “radiance” within her and the uncertainties that accompany it, manifest themselves in her repeated tendencies to overeat and then to fall asleep. Towards the end of the novel, refusing to sleep anymore, Edna claims, ““The years that are gone seem like dreams – if one might go on sleeping and dreaming – but to wake up and find – oh! well! perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life”” (105). Edna is startled by the years she feels she has spent in ignorance and is equally startled to find that there is little space in the world for her dawning realizations. In *Paradise*, as Connie struggles to accept her gift of “in-sight”, she becomes an alcoholic, frequently over-indulging in wine until she drinks herself to sleep. She eventually sleeps herself into sobriety and like Edna, she refuses to remain a victim of her own “illusions.” Both women’s journeys lead them to question “what [she] was to do with the freedom she struggled toward” (Ziff 197). Edna’s experiences remain ineffectively communicated, and it seems that the only space for her liberation at the end of the novel is the wide open sea where she swims, most likely, towards her death. At the end of *Paradise*, Connie begins to heal the women around her, but like Edna her

experiences also appear to end in death as the Convent women are “hunted” by men from the nearby town, who temporarily succeed in killing them.

William James notes a similarity across various epiphanical experiences and claims, “In all these instances, we have precisely the same psychological form of event - a firmness, stability, and equilibrium succeeding a period of storm and stress and inconsistency” (176). James notes that after epiphany, chaos can turn to calm. For Edna, erratic eating and sleeping habits, as well as discontent, turn into a resigned acceptance where she believes her only freedom lies in death. In *Paradise*, Connie’s gift of “in-sight” allows the women to become “calmly themselves”, and they are no longer malnourished “drifters.” They are eventually able to achieve a salvation where community and rebirth after death are possible.

Unlike *The Awakening*, however, the epiphanical experience in *Paradise* does not end in death or even in rebirth, and the concept involves ideas of work and instruction. It is because of the guidance of another and through work that any of the women are able to achieve salvation. For instance, Connie not only teaches the Convent women how to nourish their bodies and minds, but she herself is taught how to use and temper her gift of “in-sight” by Lone and Mary Magna. Epiphany for the women, then, becomes a salvation from poor eating habits, from their bodies, from lethargy, from indifference, and from the inhibiting perceptions of the men of Ruby. In *Paradise*, Morrison’s portrayals of epiphany involve more than a realization and go beyond life, death, rebirth, and even beyond James’s claims of chaos turning to calm. For the women in *Paradise*, salvation and epiphany involve the calm that comes from healing body and mind; however, as the novel ends, it is clear that the newly reborn women, in

complete possession of themselves, are preparing to wage war on the town of Ruby, creating new meanings of control, chaos, salvation, and epiphany.

As opposed to the first two chapters, where characters are able to achieve epiphany in their own spaces outside of life and death, chapter three presents protagonists who are weighted down by the problems that plague the characters in *Sula*, *Love*, and *Paradise*. In *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*, characters struggle with an inheritance of abandonment that causes a sterility in the present. Stories of the past overwhelm them, haunt them, and even, at times, usurp their own. Paralysis overcomes them, and their epiphanies end in a questionable reconciliation with the past that comes at the expense of the future. The idea of a truncated epiphany can be likened to a segment from Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

Here is a place of disaffection [...]
In a dim light: neither daylight [...]
Turning shadow into transient beauty [...]
Nor darkness to purify the soul
Emptying the sensual with deprivation
Cleansing affection from the temporal [...]
Only a flicker [...]
Distracted from distraction by distraction
Filled with fancies [...]. (93-105)

In "Burnt Norton", Eliot captures a moment in time that is not yet consciousness or epiphany. He describes a feeling of being lost in sensation and lost in time, so thoroughly "distracted" by surroundings that one cannot achieve the peace of mind required for enlightenment.

Zack Bowen questions the nature of epiphany and asks, "Are the epiphanies really revelations of truth or character, or do they merely appear to be truth to the consciousness which experiences them?" (104). Bowen ponders the individual's ability

to move beyond herself and the pieces of information she receives from the world around her in order to attain a more objective “truth.” In the excerpt from *Four Quartets*, as well as in *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*, characters struggle to move beyond the fragments of stories they are told about the past, and it is difficult for them to find any sort of liberating “consciousness.” Reveries or “fancies” overcome them, and they not only have trouble discarding painful memories of the past, but they also cannot help but fantasize about “the passage which [they] did not take” (Eliot 12), or in other words, the futures they might have had.

Morrison, like Eliot, also uses light imagery to portray her protagonists’ “distractions.” In *Song of Solomon*, characters are drawn to light or “glittery” places that succeed in creating false epiphanies, which are intertwined with sterility, and prevent them from living in the present. Bowen maintains that “the epiphanies may be false, because the meaning of experience, when transformed by either the artist’s perceptions or the perceptions of less gifted characters may in fact be self-delusion” (106). Bowen poses the notion of false epiphany based upon characters’ misguided or overly subjective perceptions. In terms of Morrison’s characters, their “distractions” result in a sterility where it is difficult to reproduce or to discard memories of abandonment. And, as they eventually attempt to reach a reconciliation with the past and each other, their epiphanies remain questionable.

In *Jazz*, Joe and Violet begin to reach a reconciliation by trying to live in the present, but fragments of their pasts still litter their surroundings. For example, they remain haunted throughout the novel by a photograph of the girl with whom Joe has an affair. They are also continually attempting to “recapture” something – the past, an

emotion, the former state of their bodies, the love experienced in youth – and it seems as though they are never fully comfortable with their bodies and minds in the present. Epiphany in *Song of Solomon*, as in *Jazz*, remains questionable. The concept becomes entangled in so many insubstantial things, such as wealth or commodities, that it becomes tainted. While Milkman appears to achieve a transcendent flight at the end of the novel, it is unclear how liberating that flight is. Milkman disregards his insights about Pilate in order to fly, and the only true reconciliation in the novel, which is achieved by Pilate, goes nearly unnoticed. In *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon*, Morrison presents Post-modernist epiphanies where even the author or narrator is unable to provide guidance for characters or readers. The world appears chaotic, actions seem senseless, and epiphany is vulnerable at best.

Perhaps, however, the clearest example of epiphany in Morrison's novels is the woman in yellow in *Tar Baby*, who Morrison claims is "somehow transcendent" (Naylor 194). The entirety of *Tar Baby* depicts conflicted interaction, and in most cases illustrates the impossibility of resolving any of the conflicts. For instance, the novel involves three main pairs of characters. Valerian and Margaret Street are wealthy white Americans who have permanently moved into their holiday home in the Caribbean. They have brought their black servants, Sydney and Ondine, with them from Philadelphia, and periodically Sydney and Ondine's light-skinned niece Jadine, whose education is being financed by Valerian, comes to visit. While on the island, Jadine meets Son and gets involved in a controversial relationship with him. From the beginning of the novel, disparities of wealth, color, education, and class are established not just between the Streets and their servants, but between Sydney and Ondine, Son,

and the local inhabitants. *Tar Baby* also illustrates a conflict between values. Money, beauty, education, family, and ancestry are all questioned, and each character has an opinion on which is best, how to achieve it, and on how to integrate those values into the wider world. Amidst all of the controversy, the story begins to focus on Jadine. As she moves between worlds – white and black, Europe, the Caribbean, and America, and past and future – she encounters a woman in a Parisian supermarket.

Having successfully passed her exams, been chosen for the cover of *Elle* magazine, and been pursued by three men, Jadine plans a celebratory feast and goes to the supermarket for ingredients. As she proceeds through the aisles, gathering her items, Jadine encounters a woman with “too much hip, too much bust” (42) and wearing a yellow dress. The woman in yellow has “upside down V’s [...] scarred into each of her cheeks” and attracts “full glances” from everyone in the supermarket. Jadine watches as she opens a carton of eggs, selects and removes three, and proceeds to the check-out. At that moment, the woman in yellow “looked up [...] and they saw something in her eyes so powerful it had burned away the eyelashes” (42). Then, despite the cashier’s protests over the eggs, the woman places money on the counter and walks away, “left arm folded over her waist, right hand holding three chalk-white eggs in the air” (43). Still watching intently, everyone in the supermarket wonders what the woman in yellow will do when she reaches the exit and hopes “that she would float through the glass the way a vision should” (43). As the spectators forget about the sensors on the mat in front of the door, enabling anyone to glide through, they maintain that the “woman approached it with the confidence of transcendent beauty and it flew open in silent obedience” (43).

The woman in yellow is arguably the central image in *Tar Baby*, and she repeatedly appears throughout the novel in Jadine's dreams. While Jadine's dreams are akin to nightmare, with a variety of ancestral females wearing hats and showing her their breasts, chastising her for ignoring her "ancient properties" or roots, the woman in yellow remains apart from the crowd. In the dreams, she "did something more shocking – she stretched out a long arm and showed Jadine her three big eggs" (261). Unlike the other women in Jadine's dream, who are all dead, trapped, or beyond childbearing age, the woman in yellow offers something different. She is the reification of epiphany. She is beautiful, but her scarred beauty has an indefinable quality that transcends the values surrounding her. She has retained her "ancient properties" as evidenced in her dress and manner, and yet she appears to be thriving in a Western society. Her actions are her own, and regardless of any onlookers' staring or the cashier's words, she leaves the store only with what is necessary to nourish herself. And when she appears in Jadine's dreams, she seems fertile, life-giving, and vibrant.

The scene with the woman in yellow summarizes many of the uses of epiphany discussed in the following chapters. The fact that she values her own perceptions of things, that her scarred body is beautiful, and that she is both independent in the grocery store and appears as a part of the community in Jadine's dreams encapsulates many of the issues in chapter one. Her ability to be part of the community also pertains to chapter two, as does her ability to selectively and carefully nourish herself, regardless of surrounding opinions. Finally, the fact that she seems capable of retaining her "ancient properties" while still having a meaningful present and appearing "fertile" for the future is a relevant contrast to characters in chapter three. Through the woman in yellow,

Jadine glimpses an opportunity to merge past, present, and future, and although she can only “gasp” in the supermarket at that “woman’s woman – that mother/ sister/ she” (43), by the end of the novel, Jadine reaches a potential reconciliation of values where she determines to begin her journey at “zero” and “tangle with the woman in yellow” (292).

The Journey

While epiphanies are certainly the culmination of an experience, they are only a fraction of the total experience, and for Morrison’s characters, as previously mentioned, the journey to epiphany is as relevant as the epiphany itself. In *Sula*, *Love*, *Paradise*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Jazz*, characters’ journeys to epiphany also involve the necessity of finding a harmony between body, mind, and soul, as well as between the individual and the community. In chapter one, it is not simply the acceptance found in friendship that consumes the stories of *Sula* and *Love*. The women’s journeys are entangled with a variety of fragmenting societal and communal pain that eventually manifests itself in the bodies and behavior of the individual. Andrew Hock-soon Ng states:

Space and subject are collapsed onto each other to thoroughly problematize notions of self and other, male and female, visibility and invisibility. [...] Indeed, metaphorical spaces [...] often proscribe onto bodies (and by extension subjectivities) certain configurations that reveal their states of helplessness, perversion, and (sometimes) transformation and liberation. (414)

Ng maintains that interactions between spaces and people create indefinite boundaries between “self and other, male and female, [and] visibility and invisibility”, and these relationships are illustrated in *Sula* and *Love*. As pain infiltrates the community and the individual, boundaries are both set and blurred, and perceptions repress or project pain.

The first chapter begins by using Elaine Scarry to show the extent to which Morrison's characters are victimized by pain. This pain, which is not always physical, is nonetheless embodied by Morrison's characters as they fall prey to external perceptions.

Scarry maintains:

It is the intense pain that destroys a person's self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the construction of the universe down to the vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. Intense pain is also language destroying; as the context of one's world disintegrates, so the contents of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source of subject. (35)

Scarry notes the destructive, all-consuming, and fragmentary nature of pain. As it pervades a person's body, it begins to encroach upon other areas of her life, removing language and expanding or contracting the external world around her. In *Sula*, pain ultimately usurps Sula's mind and body on her deathbed, fragmenting and disintegrating both. In *Love*, pain acts similarly, "cracking" and "splintering" Heed's body (183). The women, who have also to a certain extent lost their language, regain the ability to express themselves after death. Their bodies and pain become irrelevant, sentiousness remains, and speech is returned in a space outside of life, death, and others' perceptions.

The fragmentary and external perceptions that plague characters in both novels simultaneously inflict and receive pain, and intertwined with their perceptions are concepts of beauty and worth. Such concepts are briefly depicted through examples from Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Richard Dyer's *White* and help to illustrate the ways in which judgment can afford or remove value. As characters begin to evaluate their bodies, they become preoccupied by external judgment and the pain that it causes. The body then becomes a vehicle for societal and communal pain, and the preoccupation

with the body inhibits epiphany. The relationships between the individual and her surroundings, as noted by Ng, are also expanded upon in chapter one through Walter Pater and Gustave Flaubert. While their ideas are established nearly a century before Morrison's novels, their concepts of the relationship between space, form, and the individual have a direct bearing on interpretations of pain in *Sula* and *Love*. In both novels, the effects of pain and perception are shown to progress from society to the communities of the Bottom and Sooker Beach. The towns both illustrate communities ostracized and unwanted by whites, and the variety of perceptions that assail them then become reflected in the bodies of those who inhabit them.

In *Sula*, Nel's mother Helene and Sula's grandmother Eva are used to illustrate the detrimental effects of external perception on the individual, as well as the power specifically inherent in sight, and Patricia McKee's theories on containment and expulsion in *Sula* are taken into account. In *Love*, the bodiless characters L and Mr. Cosey are used to depict the power of perception and the influence of pain even after characters' deaths. As the relationship between society and the individual continues to fluctuate, a comparison is also made between Sula's birthmark and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and "The Birthmark." All three illustrate projected perceptions and the effects of fragmented interpretations on both the community and the individual. Philip Page's work on Morrison's novels involves a detailed examination of fragmentation and unity, and it elaborates upon concepts of wholeness as well as characters' relationships with one another. In *Love*, the ideas of projected and fragmented perceptions are illustrated through the structure of the novel itself as well as through comparisons between Mr. Cosey, L, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

While *Sula* illustrates the fragmenting and progressive nature of pain through the body, *Love* shows pain's ability to infiltrate the vacant spaces of absent bodies. The all-consuming nature of pain takes on a variety of forms, and it is not until the women acknowledge and dissolve those forms in death and in friendship that they achieve the acceptance of epiphany.

In *Sula*, Nel and Sula's childhood dreams are shown to establish the first bonds of acceptance and friendship between the girls. As opposed to Houston A. Baker's Freudian interpretation of the episode, the body is not as relevant as having a non-judgmental companion. In *Love*, Junior's dreams emphasize a longing for acceptance and companionship that is never quite fulfilled, and while some characters such as Eva and Junior seem to have temporary epiphanies, Nel, Sula, Heed, and Christine manage to find acceptance and end fragmentation. By the end of both novels, the women are able to acknowledge and examine their pain, dissolve the fragmenting perceptions of the external world, and find a unity in the complete dissolution of form. Overall, chapter one establishes wider cultural interpretations of pain and form as well as taking into account some of Morrison's literary precursors. It then uses those sources as a framework from which to offer in depth readings of *Sula* and *Love*.

While chapter one discusses the shape, progression, and location of pain – in society, in the community, and in the body – and illustrates how it can be overcome so that characters can “survive whole” (Morrison, Bakerman 40), chapter two illustrates the ways in which pain can either be dissolved or exacerbated through food. Eating habits can perpetuate isolation and fragmentation or they can nourish, heal, and save. In criticism on Morrison's novels, the use of food is largely overlooked, especially in

Paradise. An early effort to analyze food is Elizabeth House's "The 'Sweet Life' in Toni Morrison's Fiction" (1984). The basic premise of her argument is:

Morrison connects simple, natural foods such as raw fruits with life-giving, idyllic values. Conversely, she links sweets, especially commercially prepared candy and pies, with competitive-success dreams; by comparing the alluring facades of sugar and outward success, she shows neither is truly nourishing to human life. (182)

House mainly focuses on *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, however, her division of foods into such strict categories treats the use of food in Morrison's novels too simplistically, and she overlooks many of its functions. Her further claim that milk is related to sugar "perhaps because of its color" (182) is largely unsubstantiated.

Emma Parker, on the other hand, elaborates on the use of food in some of Morrison's novels in her article "'Apple Pie' Ideology and the Politics of Appetite in the Novels of Toni Morrison" (1998). Written just before the publication of *Paradise*, her article is at its best in analyzing the use of sugar in Morrison's earlier novels, including *Beloved*, which has spurred some interest in the discussion of food. Barbara Hill Rigney has devoted a chapter of *The Voices of Toni Morrison* to the relationship between sexual desire and food in *Beloved*. Some interesting articles on the novel's relationship to food, in terms of milk, motherhood, and nurturing, also include Lorraine Liscio's "'Beloved's' Narrative: Writing Mother's Milk" and Lillian Corti's "*Medea* and *Beloved*: Self-Definition and Abortive Nurturing in Literary Treatments of the Infanticidal Mother." Ann Fowell Stanford also writes on food and *Beloved* in "'Death is a Skipped Meal Compared to This: Food and Hunger in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.'" Her article discusses food's relationship to slavery in the novel as well as its connection to motherhood and community. In Morrison criticism, what food discussions exist are selective and focus

overwhelmingly on sugar and slavery, motherhood, milk, and nurturing. Chapter two seeks both to widen and narrow the parameters of the discussion of food in Morrison's novels. It focuses largely on *Paradise* and investigates Morrison's wide-ranging use of food in the novel.

Chapter two begins with a brief examination of *Love*, whose relationship to pain is discussed in chapter one, and uses it to illustrate how food can be employed as a means of communication and as a way to sever or strengthen ties, and it summarizes some of the many portrayals of food in Morrison's work. The chapter proceeds to offer detailed readings of characters in *Paradise* and their relationships to food and one another, as well as the function of kitchens, gardens, and the Oven in the novel. Much like the progression of pain in chapter one, the use and misuse of food in chapter two is shown to illustrate the discord and connections between body and mind and between society, community, and the individual. Whereas pain only allows fragmentation and miscommunication, food is shown to possess the ability to be both divisive and unifying, and it illustrates interactions between communities, couples, and even the external and spiritual worlds. *Paradise's* many themes are also depicted through Morrison's use of food, which encapsulates concepts of assimilation, racial prejudice, otherness, religion, and community. Food is further entangled in the ideas of perpetuating life, race, wealth, and the past, which are analyzed more closely in chapter three.

In order to articulate and illustrate Morrison's all-encompassing use of food, an array of food critics and gourmards are employed. Beginning around the 1990s, the uses of food in culture and even literature began to be more clearly and popularly examined. Carole Counihan edited and contributed to several volumes of work,

dedicated to organizing and analyzing the uses of food in terms of culture, gender, and power, all of which are used to analyze broader thematic concepts of food in *Paradise*. Her work spurred such attention that a second and revised edition of *Food and Culture* was published in 2008. Maggie Kilgour also created an interest in the importance of food in her studies on cannibalism. Her work examines notions of food and assimilation, of maintaining and destroying boundaries, and of ideas of otherness, which are used throughout chapter two and specifically in discussing Connie's relationship with Deacon as well as Ruby's relationship with the Convent. Around the same time, Caroline Bynum began to publish on medieval women's habits of feasting and fasting. Her work, which appeared first in article form and is included in chapter two, then evolved into a book-length study involving ideas of spirituality, starvation, and bodily control. Such concepts help to illuminate the Convent women's variety of eating disorders and the ways in which they achieve a spirituality in order to overcome them.

All of the authors mentioned claim indebtedness to the earlier works of M.F.K. Fisher and Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. Writing centuries apart, Fisher in the mid-1900s and Brillat-Savarin in the late 1700s, both authors use their autobiographical observations on food as a means of examining broader issues of culture and nurturance. Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibal's", as well as Levi-Strauss's "The Raw and the Cooked", have also provided sources of inspiration for the development of food criticism and are used in chapter two to illustrate Ruby's cannibalistic relationship with its ancestors as well as to examine *Paradise*'s final "hunt" scene. Chapter two, then, incorporates a variety of pre-existing food criticisms with Morrison's own use of food in *Paradise*. Metaphorical and literal acts of consumption are illustrated as the Convent

women strive to overcome the pain and abuse reflected in their eating disorders. As M.F.K. Fisher notes, “We must eat. If, in the face of that dread fact, we can find other nourishment and expression for it, we’ll be no less full of human dignity” (353). As the Convent women learn how to nourish their bodies and minds, they ultimately attain a spiritual salvation “full of human dignity.”

Chapter three seeks to question the nature of the redemptive deaths, rebirths, and epiphanies discussed in chapters one and two. In *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon*, even if characters are able to overcome their pain and malnourishment in order to achieve a reconciliation, they are still unable to reproduce. The past is so pervasive and fragmented, as it is revealed in piecemeal fashion to characters and readers alike, that it inhibits the individual’s interactions with each other and the community, much as pain and food do in the previous chapters. The past is depicted as infectiously sterile, and as it overwhelms characters, the present and the future become literally and metaphorically sterile as well. Questions of whether childbirth is a burden or a blessing begin to arise and become entangled in histories of slavery and abandonment. Fertility is intertwined with stories from the past and characters begin to indulge in insubstantial fantasies about the future that involve wealth, false flight, and baby dolls. Protagonists are haunted by and preoccupied with their pasts and those of their ancestors, and they become equally distracted by the things they cannot attain, all of which lead to paralysis and debatable epiphanies. The chapter begins by using *Paradise* to further notions of inheritance begun in chapter two. As stories from the past are told and retold, they cause stagnation in the present and generations gradually decrease in size. Like characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*, the inhabitants of Ruby become preoccupied by the past and dream of

wealth. In all three novels, stories from the past usurp the present and future. In *Jazz*, the narration is even taken over by the past, and in *Song of Solomon*, the past commandeers epiphany.

To illustrate the paralyzing qualities of the past and how they influence reproduction in *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon*, some of Morrison's own non-fictional work is employed, especially articles from her critical compilation *What Moves at the Margin* and interviews from Danielle Taylor-Guthrie's *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. The wider critical framework for chapter three involves articles written on black movements for equality and spans a variety of time periods. W.E.B. DuBois's reflections on the birth and death of his infant son illustrate the ways in which reproduction is affected by skin color. Several articles from turn-of-the-century 1900s America in Henry Louis Gates's anthology *The New Negro* are used to show the ways in which color and sex are perceived to affect the individual's future. Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and Marcus Garvey, all writing in the 1960s and 1970s, articulate their views on the importance of reproduction, birth control, and fertility. All of the mentioned sources help to place Morrison's novels in a wider and relevant cultural framework that illustrates the ways in which fertility and reproduction are perceived to be affected by the past and the ways in which they might, in turn, affect the future.

Chapter three also seeks to incorporate wider ideas of the gothic into its readings of *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon*, especially Kathleen Brogan's *Cultural Hauntings: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*. Brogan's work, as well as Patricia Yaegar's "Ghosts and Shattered Bodies" help to redefine notions of haunting and put them in a more modern literary context. Their studies, as well as Teresa Goddu's *Gothic*

America (1997) and Daniel Erikson's recent *Ghosts, Metaphor, and History* (2009) are, to an extent, indebted to Morrison's own *Playing in the Dark* (1990). This broader look at what it means to be haunted and at what constitutes the gothic supports ideas of the negative influences of the past on the present and the future. Such works also create a juxtaposition between the multitude of criticism on Morrison that views the past as redemptive and liberating. The studies include Gayl Jones's *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* and Genevieve Fabre's "Genealogical Archeology, or the Quest for Legacy in *Song of Solomon*." While such criticism on Morrison focuses on the effects of the past on the present, specific Morrison criticism involving the past's effects on fertility and reproduction remains elusive. Ideas of insubstantiality, however, are articulated in Susan Willis's "'Eruptions of Funk'" and Cynthia Davis's "Self, Society, and Myth", and their comments on *The Bluest Eye* are helpful in analyzing similar notions in *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon*. Overall, chapter three integrates wider cultural discussions of reproduction, specifically in terms of the African American community, and utilizes Morrison's own non-fictional work as well as broader discussions on haunting to depict the past's influence on epiphany and the present and future in *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon*.

Overall, the chapters in this thesis seek to provide a different perspective on Morrison's work. In that sense, they do not address race or gender in a way that is concurrent with traditional Morrison criticism. For example, in chapter one, pain is shown to be universally isolating, regardless of sex or color. The specific pain of the black communities that Morrison depicts is, however, attributed to a variety of judgments from both blacks and whites and from those both inside and outside of the

community. Similarly, in terms of individual pain, the ensuing argument illustrates the ways in which Morrison universally emphasizes the body or its absence. In chapter two, race and gender are discussed in terms of forming communities. Gender is further addressed when interpreting the eating habits of the Convent women and the women of Ruby in comparison to the men of Ruby. In chapter three, race is linked to fertility and sterility, and textual examples are used in conjunction with a variety of scholarly work on population growth in the African American community as well as essays and writings from African American activists spanning a range of time periods.

Finally, the afterword discusses *A Mercy*. It illustrates the ways in which the themes of Morrison's novels overlap as well as the ways in which she examines and re-examines her preoccupations with pain, food, and the past. While *A Mercy* initially feels unburdened or raw as it tells an American origins tale in less than two hundred pages, depicts only a handful of characters, and is stripped of chapter titles, it is rife with discussions of race, sex, religion, abandonment, community, and isolation. What has the potential to be a sprawling epic is succinctly told, and the novel illustrates Morrison's continuing examination of the concepts discussed in chapters one, two, and three. By the end of *A Mercy*, epiphany is also achieved, and as the main character Florens carves her story into walls and floorboards, she experiences a self-determined redemption that seems to come through the act of writing. The fact that Florens's epiphany occurs through the act of writing makes it appear more Modernist than Post-modernist. Much like Joyce, Eliot, or Woolf, Florens believes it is her responsibility to record and make sense of her life. However, the unknown pervades both Florens's epiphany and her

writing, and because her mother's pain remains unknown to her, Florens's epiphany too can be viewed as ambiguous.

Conclusion

In an interview with Jane S. Bakerman, when asked what she writes about, Morrison claims:

Beauty, love...actually, I think, all the time that I write, I'm writing about love or its absence. [...]

But I think that I still write about the same thing, which is how people relate to one another and miss it or hang on to it...or are tenacious about love.

About love and how to survive – not to make a living – but how to survive *whole* in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, *victims of something*. Each one of us is in some way at some moment a victim and in no position to do a thing about it. Some child is always left unpicked up at some moment. In a world like that, how does one remain whole – is it just impossible to do that? (40)

Morrison maintains that she writes about love and the many forms it does or does not embody, and all of her novels do, in fact, discuss various aspects of love through illustrations of characters' relationships with one another and themselves. All of these varied relationships, which include bonds of matrimony, parenthood, ancestry, and friendship, indeed depict the "absence", "missing", "hanging onto", or "tenacity" of love.

As the conversation with Bakerman continues, the focus also remains on love, and Morrison's comments on "victimhood" and "surviving whole" do not receive as much notice. Love and the unending search for it may be the driving forces behind Morrison's characters, but perhaps what instigates the search, and what Morrison takes the time to explore fully in almost all of her characters, is that each is in some way broken or a "victim." Ledbetter broadly defines "victimization" as "the body made

unhealthy, the body hurt, the body scarred” (14). For Morrison, “victimhood” is analyzed from a plethora of angles, from rape, abortion, murder, societal rejection, and parental abuse to seemingly simpler moments of refusing to share an ice cream cone, of rain ruining hair, clothing, and make-up, and even of the inability to cook an appetizing meal.

“Victimhood” is pervasive and with it comes pain and notions of rejection, abandonment, malnourishment, and displacement. Individuals come to feel fragmented, lost, and unwanted, and their quests for acceptance, salvation, and reconciliation lead them on journeys to balance self and community, past and future, and inside and outside. Morrison believes that African American autobiographical literature offers an equilibrium between such spheres because its authors are able to say, ““My single solitary struggle and individual life is like the lives of the tribe; it differs in these specific ways, but it is a balanced life because it is both solitary and representative”” (*Margin* 57). For Morrison’s characters, the ability to be both “representative *of* the tribe and *in* it” (56) occurs in epiphanic moments, and the journey to these moments of unity allow characters’ fragmented, victimized selves to strive towards acceptance, salvation, and reconciliation.

The Forms of Pain

“To describe, to unify, to make order out of all these severed parts.”

Georg Lukacs
“American Fiction” 120

Sethe, in *Beloved*, has a chokecherry tree whipped into her back. In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate is born without a belly button. *Paradise* depicts a score of anomaliated females, including Seneca, who has a propensity for cutting herself, and Connie, who, like Therese from *Tar Baby*, is simultaneously blind and visionary. Sula, from the novel bearing her name, sports a mutating birthmark while her grandmother, Eva, mysteriously loses a leg. In *Love*, Junior’s and Heed’s feet and hands are amphibious, and Celestial, much like Dorcas in *Jazz*, has a facial scar. Connie is also abused as a child, Pecola, in *The Bluest Eye*, is molested by her father, a girl is gang-raped in *Love*, and Son forces himself on Jadine in *Tar Baby*. Plots in *Song of Solomon* and *Love* have strong focuses on dead men, *Jazz* revolves around a murdered mistress, *Sula* involves a drowned child and a shell-shocked veteran, and *Beloved* tells not only the story of “sixty million and more” lost in The Middle Passage, but also of a mother driven to harm and murder her children. Discussing *Beloved*, Anita Durkin claims:

In her representation of scarred bodies that are also textual bodies, Morrison sustains such meta-fictional concerns throughout *Beloved*, through her representation of the forced objecthood of slaves by slave owners, expressed in the novel through the encoding of black bodies by whites through whipping, beating, and ultimately scarring, actions that at once force enslaved African Americans to become the object of white narratives and the text on which these narratives are inscribed. (542)

Durkin notes the use of the black body as text and object, inscribed upon by white society. If, however, the black body is the product of literal, metaphorical, and historical abuse, questions arise as to how the individual can overcome such acts, as well as how Toni Morrison's characters can conquer the pain inherent in physical abuse and mental perceptions in order to achieve a meaningful connection with another.

Throughout Toni Morrison's novels, scarred, raped, abused, and dead bodies illustrate physical, visible representations of pain. Pain, depicted through the form of a single body, both permeates and is influenced by the spaces that surround it, and communities and cultures either nurture or demolish pain. These representations of pain, both separate and inseparable from the minds and memories that surround them, also serve as catalysts for Morrison's epiphanies. For Morrison's characters, specifically in *Sula* and *Love*, a flux which involves pain exists between the individual and the community and between that which is internal and that which is external. Her characters strive to maintain a balance between such spheres, and the epiphanies they journey towards involve acceptance. For them, what is important is not a "feeling of being, of existence", but a "feeling of participation" (xvii). Gaston Bachelard's statement indicates the necessity of a relationship between an individual and her surrounding space. In terms of Morrison and her characters, such a reciprocal relationship is frequently stunted by pain, which leads to fragmentation and a preoccupation with the body. In *Sula* and *Love*, protagonists seek an acceptance, or the ability to "participate", beyond the limits of pain, the body, or simple conformity. Epiphany, for them, involves the unity implied by "participate", as well as the dissolution of all the forms that inhibit such a participation, all of which frequently can be found only in death.

Pain and a preoccupation with the body, in *Sula* and *Love*, cause fragmentation and are the greatest inhibitors to the unity found in acceptance and epiphany. According to Elaine Scarry, in her work *The Body in Pain*, pain is the underlying basis for action and creation. She claims:

Pain begins by being ‘not itself’ and ends by having eliminated all that is ‘not itself.’ At first occurring only as an appalling but limited internal fact, it eventually occupies the entire body and spills out into the realm beyond the body, takes over all that is inside and outside, makes the two obscenely indistinguishable, and systematically destroys anything like language or world extension that is alienating to itself or threatening to its claims. Terrifying for its narrowness, it nevertheless exhausts and displaces all else until it seems to become the single broad and omnipresent fact of existence. (54-55)

Scarry maintains the destructive, all-consuming nature of pain. At times beginning as an obscure and foreign presence, pain gradually manifests itself in all parts of the body and mind, eventually incorporating external spaces into itself. Small physical ailments can escalate into broader bodily pains that can then distort an individual’s way of thinking, eliminating any reality outside of pain. Because each infliction or reception of pain is a unique experience, an individual becomes isolated from the world around her. Language fails, and a different reality begins to replace pre-pain perceptions of life. David B. Morris in *The Culture of Pain* cites Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” as an example of the concept. Commercially successful and physically fit, Ilyich one day bumps the side of his body while redecorating his home. Throughout the story, the pain in his side escalates until it consumes him. Reliant on servants to move, bathe, and clothe him, Ilyich also no longer cares for the material or social objects that once occupied his mind and his time. His mind and body, and even the outside world, become subservient to his pain. What is almost unnoticed is

that the story then ends, not only with Ilyich's death, but with an epiphany. Morris claims that Ilyich, before he dies, "understands his pain" and is able to "interpret" it (*Culture of Pain* 37). Instead, however, it seems that Ilyich looks for pain, cannot find it, and "instead of death, there was light. [...] All of this happened to him in a single moment, and the meaning of that moment was not going to change" ("Ilyich" 217). Spoken words fail Ilyich, and the unknown, uncommunicated epiphany occurs in the dissolution of all verbal, bodily, mental, and external forms. Death has brought with it clarity, freedom, and "bliss" (217), but most importantly, it has ended the isolation and fragmentation caused by pain.

Unlike "The Death of Ivan Ilyich", however, in Morrison's novels the journey to epiphany does not always begin with only a physical ailment. Despite her characters' many anomalies, pain is often first experienced at an external level. Dominant white societies, as well as a history of slavery and repression, influence all the other manifestations of pain in Morrison's works. Cynthia Davis maintains that "all of Morrison's characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it" (323). For instance, before Sethe's personal chokecherry tree is slavery, *Sweet Home*, and *The Middle Passage*. Before Pilate's bellybutton and Hagar's insanity, is a predominant white culture that disallows landowning blacks to the point of killing Pilate's father. And in *Sula*, *Paradise*, and *Love*, before the various self-harmings, amputations, deaths, and rapes, are towns founded on land unwanted by whites. This pre-established, almost ingrained cultural pain, tension, and disparity, is then manifested physically in the bodies of her characters. Morris claims, "The isolation of pain is undeniable. Yet it

is thus especially important to recognize that pain is also always deeply social. The pain we feel has in large part been constructed or shaped by the culture from which we now feel excluded or cut off” (37-38). However, the external or cultural pain that establishes a relationship with the individual’s body is not “participatory.” Rather, it is forced, fragmented, and negative, and characters strive to overcome such dictatorial bonds with society and look for a reciprocal relationship that dissolves the bonds of both external and internal pain.

Perhaps the clearest example of cultural pain becoming individually internalized is found in *The Bluest Eye*. In her first novel, Morrison illustrates a community preoccupied with white Hollywood beauty. The black narrator Claudia and her sister Frieda are described as “Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers” (10) when their parents’ lodger, Mr. Henry, wishes to compliment their appearances. The novel’s third major character, Pecola, on the other hand, is ridiculed with taunts of ““Black e mo”” by schoolboys whose “contempt for their own blackness [...] gave the first insult its teeth” (50). This “exquisitely learned self-hatred” (50) is further reflected in Pecola’s parents. Cholly, Pecola’s father, is haunted by childhood memories of white men calling him “coon” (116), and Pauline, Pecola’s mother, once harbored dreams of looking like Jean Harlow (96). When Cholly’s childhood traumas culminate in soiling himself in the midst of a search for a father who does not want him (123), and when Pauline’s attempts at Hollywood glamour end in pregnancy and a missing tooth, they simply began to “w[ea]r their ugliness, so to speak, although it did not belong to them” (28). The ugliness the Breedloves maintain is imposed on them by both a black and a white society, idolizing white skin and blue eyes, and it is then projected onto Pecola from the

moment she leaves the womb (97-98). The Breedloves exemplify the idea illustrated in Richard Dyer's *White* that "whites take the position of ordinariness, not a particular race, just the human race" (foreword, para. 1). By viewing themselves through white cultural standards of "normal" beauty, the Breedloves begin to see themselves distinctly as "lesser than" and "other than." Walther adds to Dyer's argument, stating that "the effect of popular American culture's specular construction of beauty is that it bestows presence or absence. One's visibility depends on one's beauty" (777). Pecola, therefore, is not ugly but becomes it in the eyes of a bigoted society and a humiliated family, most of whom are convinced that success, happiness, beauty, and even visibility lie in glamorized billboards and blue-eyed baby dolls. This societal and familial insistence on a single definition of beauty results not only in Pecola's obsession with blue eyes, Frieda's Shirley Temple cup (17), or in buying Mary Jane candies (37), but in her being raped by her father. Cut-off from any external relationships after being abused, the rape of her body becomes the rape of her mind, as Pecola is driven insane by images of and desires for blue eyes. In *The Bluest Eye*, external factors such as family and society compel characters to evaluate their bodies. For instance, the involvement of the white men during Cholly's first sexual encounter, as well as his later incontinence while searching for his father, lead Cholly to believe that he has no control over his own body. Additionally, both the town's and Pauline's preference for white beauty spur Pecola's desire to transform her body. However, the Breedloves get caught further in the conundrum articulated by Dyer of "a wider notion of the white body, of embodiment, of whiteness involving something that is in but not of the body" (14). The Breedloves have set for themselves a doubly unattainable goal: a whiteness illustrated by the body but

that the pervading culture denies is of the body. In the end, while it is Pecola's mind and not her body that is altered, Morrison's first novel begins a pattern of pain, fragmentation, and bodily preoccupation that is repeated continuously throughout her work.

Perceptions of External Pain

Two of Morrison's later novels, *Sula* (1973) and *Love* (2003), depict slightly more complex notions of how pain and the body are influenced by internal and external perceptions, and unlike Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, the protagonists Nel, Sula, Heed, and Christine are all afforded the opportunities of acceptance and epiphany found in the dissolution of form. Although written thirty years apart, both novels are centered around black towns, unnoticed or unwanted by a larger, dominant white culture. *Sula's* narrative and setting of "the Bottom" are both located in the past, and the first words of the novel are "In that place" (3), which causes it to open vaguely, with the word "that" and with a sense of permanence in the word "place." While "place" at first seems rooted in structure and form, it quickly becomes a malleable concept to readers, and the notion of the Bottom as a community becomes muddled by perception. Looking back on the events of the past, *Sula* also begins with a description of the community as a "nigger joke" (4), involving a lie told by a white man to an ex-slave in order to make a profit from unwanted land. The story within the story is passed on through generations about the undesirability of the land on which they live and the deception that placed them there; however, as the novel moves through the past, the neighborhood ironically begins to be perceived as "the bottom of heaven" (5), and the white population starts to descend on property made idyllic by its river and golf-course potential. In terms of the Bottom,

the reader is forced to see the gaps in both stories that characters cannot. What is left out is the fact that a newly freed slave manages to form the beginnings of a cohesive, functional, and independent community. What is also only implied is the idea that judgment, white or otherwise, affords or removes value. The implication is further expressed by Kathy Mezei and Chiara Briganti, in their discussion “Reading the House: A Literary Perspective”, that “inevitably, the spaces of domesticity and fiction shape the people who inhabit them; conversely, people and characters create and shape the spaces they inhabit” (840). Mezei and Briganti’s statement indicates a mutual trend between spaces and inhabitants to give “shape” and meaning to one and other; however, as seen with the varying perceptions of the Bottom, this relationship can be fragmented and incomplete, and there are contradictory views of the town as “place”, “joke”, and “community.” It is this sense of fluctuation and fragmentation, and what ultimately amounts to muddled perceptions, that soon becomes reflected in the bodies and behavior of the residents of the Bottom.

Similar to the story of the Bottom, in *Love*, the beach town of Sucra, “*a name local whites tore up for all time*” (8), becomes Sooker Beach. It is first named and claimed by Spaniards, who thought the beach resembled sugar, and subsequent generations of whites eventually transform the name into Sooker. C. Davis claims, “The misnaming [of various predominantly black community locations] does not eliminate the reality of the black world. But it does reflect a distortion. Blacks are visible to white culture only insofar as they fit its frame of reference and serve its needs” (324). Naming and misnaming contribute to perception, and much like Walther’s comment on beauty in *The Bluest Eye*, they also add or detract from visibility. With Mr. Cosey, the owner of

most of Sooker Beach, the “resort was more than a playground; it was a school and a haven” (35) and when “*the devoted outweighed the jealous, the hotel basked in his glow*” (103). However, the death of Cosey’s first wife Julia, then his only son Billy, and finally a failure to create more children, all contribute to Mr. Cosey’s growing disinterest in the Resort and the town. Leaving business decisions to his uneducated child-bride Heed and delusional daughter-in-law May, the Resort loses the appeal it maintained when Mr. Cosey ran it himself. Formerly a “Hotel Make-Believe” (167), rumors, fights, and discontentment eventually fill the spaces previously occupied by customers, good cooking, coronets, and dancing. Later, “*Mr. Cosey told people that’s what ruined his business – that the whites had tricked him, let him buy all the oceanfront he wanted because the cannery, so close by, kept it unprofitable. The fish smell had turned his resort into a joke*” (8). Like *Sula*’s description of the “nigger joke” Bottom, the beach town soon embodies the perceptions of it. The settings of both *Sula* and *Love* become jokes because residents describe them as such, and the Resort, once profitable and successful despite the trickery, is scorned when it seemingly can no longer combat white perceptions. Cosey’s Hotel and Resort, like the Bottom and the town of Sooker, once represented the efforts of black Americans to put the past behind them and make a place for themselves. The surrounding land itself, once prized and once shunned by black and white onlookers alike, is presently without personality and has become a generic housing development site as well as a basis for nostalgia, memory, and ultimately, fragmentation. As with *Sula*, all of the external mixed perceptions and opinions then manifest themselves in characters’ views of their bodies and of one another.

In both *Sula* and *Love*, as cultural perceptions, judgments, and placing of value pervade the communities in which characters live, the characters in turn become altered. Despite writing nearly a century apart from Morrison, Pater's and Flaubert's reflections on the association between body, structure, and form relate to her portrayals of such relationships in her novels. Pater clearly articulates a relationship between the body and the space surrounding it in his article "Emerald Uthwart", claiming, "The very place one is in, its stone-work, its empty spaces, invade you; invade all who belong to them [...] seem to question you masterfully as to your purpose in being here at all" (*Miscellaneous Studies* 207). Put simply, the physical location of a body greatly influences that body and its perceptions. Viewing body, building, and space all as structure, Pater notes the impression of one upon the other, and claims that external "structures" cyclically "invade" the thoughts and bodies of the individuals who have comprised, built, and, in turn, appraised them. However, "invade" has negative connotations as though the relationship between the individual and the surrounding structure is not "participatory" but forced and even overwhelming. Flaubert, too, offers a connection between structure and the individual:

"There are no beautiful thoughts [...] without beautiful forms, and conversely. As it is impossible to extract form from a physical body the qualities which really constitute it – colour, extension, and the like – without reducing it to a hollow abstraction, in a word, without destroying it; just so it is impossible to detach the form from the idea, for the idea only exists by virtue of the form." (qtd. in Pater *Appreciations* 30)

Flaubert maintains a correlation between idea and form. Ideas, existing intangibly, only gain coherence through form, which can include words, body, building, and structure. Form then becomes an expression of an idea or "thought", and the two become

inextricably linked. In Flaubert's statement, there is the notion of separate spheres, or the distinction between thought and form, and yet there remains an inability to untangle them. In both Flaubert's and Pater's comments, the notions of inextricability and "invasion" do not necessarily have positive implications. Instead, they seem reliant on perception, which can be dictated, distorted, and misconstrued, and it is because of perception that form, structure, and the individual can become "destroyed" or fragmented rather than unified. It is this flux between unity and the fragments that comprise it that is also embodied in Morrison's work, and the form of the "tribe" or community is created by the individuals both within and without it. Ultimately, this flux between isolation and integration, form and thought, and individual and community is captured in the bodies and behavior of her characters. Striving to be whole, her characters' fragmentation is illustrated through the perception and projection of pain and a desire for belonging, and an epiphanic unity can only seemingly be found in death.

In *Sula*, Sula judges and is in turn judged by her surrounding community as well as her family. As a child, she temporarily achieves integration with the Bottom through her friend Nel, but as she matures Sula becomes a pariah, fragmented by perception. In the end, however, perception and pain are dissolved through Sula's death, and both she and Nel achieve epiphanies. In *Sula*, the concepts of form, fragmentation, unity, and pain articulated by Morrison, Pater, Flaubert, and Scarry are perhaps best illustrated through Sula's birthmark. It is at once both fluid and stagnant, and it simultaneously illustrates Sula and the perceptions of the onlooker. Permanently a feature of her face, the birthmark mutates into a rose (138), tadpole, snake (103), her mother's ashes (114), or simply a black mark, depending upon characters' perceptions of her. For the people

of the Bottom, “Sula never competed; she simply helped others define themselves” (95). Sula fills the empty or unexamined spaces in the townspeople’s lives, and through different perceptions of her, the town is able to place “evil” and displace their own “dirt” (115). Philip Page claims that “instead of making her a subject”, Sula’s birthmark “makes her always an object” (*Dangerous Freedom* 81), and Gubar similarly notes that “the woman who cannot become an artist can nevertheless turn herself into an artistic object” (249). Sula, the “artist without a form” (*Sula* 121) has, with the help of her birthmark, afforded form for the people of the Bottom. After a hiatus away from the Bottom, Sula’s eventual return to the town is not only met with judgment but is also “accompanied by a plague of robins” (89), and despite wearing “a black felt hat with the veil of net lowered over one eye” (90), Sula’s best friend Nel feels as though she is “getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed” (95). Sula’s birthmark, however, instead seems to serve as a mask, obscuring and exemplifying the town’s sins and perceptions as well as Sula’s personality, and Nel and the townspeople fluctuate between attributing both “evil” and “playfulness” (95) to her. The town, as opposed to Nel, views Sula’s return as an evil thing to “survive”, and they had comparably survived “floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine, and ignorance” (90). At the same time, “their conviction of Sula’s evil changed them in unaccountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. [...] In their world, aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace. It was not for them to expel or annihilate it” (117-118). The community’s capacity for judgment and observation is accompanied by an inability to self-reflect or to intercede in what they feel is evil. Their “personal misfortunes”, or pain, are transferred,

projected onto, and attributed to Sula, and such transference allows the residents of the Bottom to achieve a false sense of unity and acceptance in her presence. In other words, “they began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes, and in general bond together against the devil in their midst” (117-118). As soon as Sula dies, however, the “bond” is broken and a “restless irritability” takes its place (153). The “change” Sula inspires in the townspeople is not genuine. Rather, it is an attempt, on the part of the Bottom, to separate, isolate, and displace Sula, and the community’s attitude towards one of the individuals that comprises it is not unlike the inherently fragmented views of the Bottom itself.

Sula, her birthmark, and the conflicting views they inspire are also reminiscent of Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter* and short story, “The Birthmark.” In “The Birthmark”, Georgiana’s alchemist husband Alymer views her birthmark, which is red and in the shape of a “tiny hand”, as a “defect” while others view it as a “charm”, a “fairy’s hand” (260), or a “magic endowment” (261). By the end of the tale, Alymer tries to remove the birthmark, only to find that “the stain goes as deep as life itself” (263), and he ends up inadvertently killing, instead of “curing” his wife. Such conflicting perceptions in “The Birthmark” as well as in *Sula* become wholly intertwined with the community’s, the reader’s, and other characters’ notions of who these women are, and the complete pictures of Georgiana and Sula become inseparable from how others interpret their birthmarks. Hester Prynne, in *The Scarlet Letter*, also faces a multitude of fragmented and fragmenting perceptions. She is forced to stitch the letter “A” upon her dress as a punishment for committing adultery. Throughout the course of the novel, the “Scarlet Letter, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated

upon her bosom [...] had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the realm of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself” (40). Hester’s *Scarlet Letter* simultaneously entangles her in and repels her from the community that condemns and judges her. She both “invades” and is “invaded” by her community, and her body soon becomes inextricable from the abstract notion and physical form of the letter upon her chest. As Slatterly claims, it has become a “wound that has matured and taken on its own shape on the body” (54). Like Sula and Georgiana’s birthmarks, the letter has a malleable meaning, and becomes a symbol for “Angel” (109) or “Able” (110) as well as being compared to “the cross on a nun’s bosom” (111) and seen as a charm against evil. The novel’s antagonist and Hester’s cuckolded husband, Roger Chillingworth, however, claims that Hester and her letter A are ““a living sermon against sin, until the ignominious letter be engraved upon her tombstone”” (45). Like Sula, Hester becomes the town’s pariah, and her letter A becomes a symbol of projected perceptions and fragmentation, as well as a form in which others can place or displace their own wrongdoings. Hester’s letter and Sula and Georgiana’s birthmarks also exemplify the extent to which form can be constructed by perception. It is this fragmentation, this “conflict between public and private life” echoed in Morrison’s statement and embodied in Hawthorne’s stories and Sula’s birthmark that inspires a need for unity and a dissolution of the perceptions and pain that inhibit it, and Sula’s birthmark, as Carolyn M. Jones asserts, offers the possibility of both “alienation” as well as “latent beauty and wholeness” (“Images” 625). All of the protagonists in Morrison’s novels try to find an “individual expression [...] within the context of the community”; however, because so many of them are willing to displace their ideals and judgments

rather than acknowledge them, characters like Sula and Nel must initially strive to overcome such negative projections and perceptions of pain. Eventually, through death, their friendship, and ultimate acceptance of one another, both women are able to reach epiphanic moments of dissolution and unity.

Love too illustrates the effects of a community's fragmented perceptions on the individuals within it. The novel involves two main characters, Heed and Christine, whose friendship is acted upon by society, their families, and even the narrator. Their story, told by the deceased narrator L, includes the equally dead Mr. Cosey and is a reflection on the roles he played in many characters' lives. This preoccupation with Mr. Cosey involves not only Heed, Christine, and L, but also his former employees Sandler and Vida, their grandson Romen, and a wandering teenager, Junior, who eventually dates Romen and is hired by Heed. Like Sula's birthmark, components of *Love* also illustrate Flaubert's notion that an "idea exists by virtue of its form." Beginning with the novel's title, the word "Love" itself adopts different meanings, and before the novel is even opened, readers are met with a command, a plea, a description, or even just a statement. The title is a concept or a notion waiting to be completed and filled in, and it remains merely an outline of an idea or image. It can refer to characters' feelings toward Mr. Cosey, who is only present in the novel through the recollections of those obsessed with him. In turn, "Love" could refer to feelings he may have expressed towards his mistress Celestial, to either of his wives, or to his son. It could alternatively pertain to other characters' feelings for one another, such as his granddaughter Christine's friendship with Heed, who becomes Cosey's second wife. Also, "Love" could refer to the mysterious, partially-named L. Each of the novel's nine chapter titles, too, is an

outline, and each offers a different perspective, or potential form, of the deceased Mr. Cosey; however, he is not just the “Portrait”, “Friend”, “Stranger”, “Benefactor”, “Lover”, “Husband”, “Guardian”, “Father”, or “Phantom” of the chapter titles but is instead a fragmented combination of all nine. The titles in *Love* are representative not only of Mr. Cosey and characters’ perceptions of him, but they are also illustrative of the other characters themselves. For instance, the first chapter, “Portrait”, refers to a literal painting of Mr. Cosey above Heed’s bed as well as what it represents to the characters viewing it. Heed believes she sees ““a wonderful man”” (26), and Junior feels he has “kind eyes that promised to hold a girl steady” (30). When Christine enters the room with the portrait, however, she tries “not to shiver before the ‘come on’ eyes in the painting over the grotesque bed” (97). Even Sandler claims that his wife Vida “believed a powerful, generous friend gazed out from the portrait [...only] because she didn’t know who he was looking at” (45). “Portrait” is also the chapter where Junior arrives in Sooker Beach, and the title could refer to the multitude of images of herself that she presents to the town. The ultimate illustration of fragmented perception, however, is the portrait itself. “Painted from a snapshot” (26), the picture of Mr. Cosey is merely an image obscured and dictated by layers of interpretation before it has even been viewed by others. The seemingly unified concept of a portrait, then, comes to represent an array of contrasting opinions and relationships. Likewise, “Guardian” depicts Sandler and Vida’s role in Romen’s life, as well as Mr. Cosey’s supposed role in Heed’s, Christine’s, and Junior’s lives. “Phantom” too is equally as representative of L and Celestial, who is also dead from the beginning of the novel, as it is of Mr. Cosey. By the time the ghostly Celestial sits on Cosey’s grave at the end of the novel, “hiding the insult: ‘Ideal

Husband. Perfect Father” (202), the multitude of images involving Mr. Cosey and the roles characters play in each others’ lives are already evident. It is therefore not surprising that Celestial conceals not just “the insult” but also the two perspectives of Mr. Cosey as “husband” and “father” that she dislikes. However fragmented the chapter headings and perceptions are, though, they also link artist, art, and audience, and the initial appearance of the chapter titles referring solely to Mr. Cosey lures readers into as much of a preoccupation with him as the characters. Much like Sula’s birthmark or Hester’s letter, the very structure of *Love* encourages fragmentation and differing perceptions.

Despite or perhaps because of the multitude of perceptions, Mr. Cosey remains elusive. Much like the novel’s title and chapter headings, his presence in the novel remains “an outline of a life” (*Love* 163). Referred to almost always as Mr. rather than Bill, his name itself becomes secretive and distant. The indefinable qualities of Mr. Cosey and the novel’s title and chapter headings are evocative of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.¹ In *Heart of Darkness*, a story within a story is told as the novel’s protagonist Marlow goes on an undefined and indefinable quest of discovery. Entangled in his journey through parts of Africa is the equally elusive Mr. Kurtz, and Marlow’s quest becomes as much a search for Kurtz as for definition and substance. By the end of *Heart of Darkness*, it is evident that even the novel’s title is indefinable. It could refer geographically to the parts of Africa that Marlow and Kurtz visit or to London where Marlow conveys his tale. The title could also relate to Kurtz’s and Marlow’s inner states

¹ Morrison refers to Conrad in the review “On *The Radiance of the King* by Camara Laye”, which can be found in *What Moves at the Margin*.

or to the general condition of humankind. In the novel, Kurtz is shielded by layers of narration, and he too lacks a first name. He is described as a “‘first class field agent’”, a “‘remarkable person’” (37), “‘the chief of the Inner Station’”, “‘a prodigy’”, and “‘an emissary of pity and science and progress and devil knows what else’” (47). He is called a “‘universal genius’” (51), a “‘great musician’” (115), and someone who “‘ought to have been in politics’” (116). Even Marlow “‘had taken him for a painter who wrote for the papers, or [...] for a journalist who could paint’” (116). Just as Cosey is not physically present in *Love*, Kurtz remains absent throughout much of *Heart of Darkness* and is dead from its beginning. Both men haunt or “invade” any space they enter, including the mind of the reader, and become as much of a distraction to readers as they are to other characters. Mr. Kurtz and Mr. Cosey are represented through others’ recollections and descriptions of their actions, and the stories that are told by the characters obsessively preoccupied with them serve only to obscure and fragment the dead men. Overall, like Sula’s and Georgiana’s birthmarks, Hester’s letter A, and the mystery of Kurtz, *Love*’s structure and portrayal of Mr. Cosey lend themselves to readers’ varied interpretations. They also hint, through the word “Love” itself, at a redemptive interpretation where, perhaps, the preoccupations of those in the novel can be unified and dissolved. Through the love found in friendship and the dissolution found in death, Heed and Christine are eventually able to find a new space and place for themselves in a fragmented world previously owned and pervaded by Mr. Cosey.

Bodies, Manipulations, and Amputations: Personal Pain

In both *Sula* and *Love*, fragmented external perceptions and cultural rejections then manifest themselves in personal, bodily expressions of pain. Angela Cotton, in her article “Pain: A Feminist Perspective?” states:

If women’s experience of their bodies is indeed partly characterized by painful processes and procedures which regulate and contain them (for example periods and childbearing, cosmetic improvement), then it is not surprising that women may be preoccupied with having and being their bodies, rather than with transcending and being disembodied, an “absent body” who operates freely without constraint. (123)

Cotton’s statement indicates that bodily preoccupations are possibly natural and cultural conditions for women. Her statement further asserts that the preoccupations are a result of pain and lend a feeling of containment, or inescapability. Janette Turner Hospital, speaking of Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and of woman’s need to achieve personal space, states, “The search involves contraction into smaller and smaller space; frequently it leads to an ultimate withdrawal into the body itself. But even this last little haven of flesh is subject to emotional and physical invasion” (3). The withdrawal into the body is seen negatively as it too can be acted upon. As maintained by Scarry, pain and containment ultimately lead to isolation and fragmentation, which, as seen through the example of Ivan Ilyich, inhibit epiphany until the body and its preoccupations become irrelevant. This sense of being confined to one’s body, and therefore to one’s pain, is true in terms of Nel’s mother Helene; however, for Mr. Cooney, Junior, Sula’s grandmother Eva, and L, who are the other characters discussed in this section, even possessing an “absent” body or absent body parts is rooted in pain. All of the characters mentioned struggle to contend with external perceptions and even try to manipulate them; however, they remain so inseparable from judgment and from concepts of absent

or present bodies that they fail to achieve a reciprocal relationship with their communities.

In *Sula*, Helene dreads leaving the Bottom because of fears of judgment and placing of value. She is uncomfortable with her body and the form it takes when strangers view it. On a train leaving the Bottom, Helene is not only confronted with a hostile environment, but with hostile memories:

The conductor let his eyes travel over the pale yellow woman and then stuck his little finger into his ear, jiggling it free of wax. "What you think you doin', gal?"

Helene looked up at him.

So soon. So soon. She hadn't even begun the trip back. Back to her grandmother's house in the city where red shutters glowed, and already she had been called "gal." All the old vulnerabilities, all the old fears of somehow being flawed gathered in her stomach and made her hands tremble. She heard only that one word [gal]; it dangled above her wide-brimmed hat, which had slipped, in her exertion, from its carefully leveled placement and was now tilted in a bit of a jaunt over her eye. (20)

In *Perspectives on Pain*, Judith H. Watt-Watson claims that pain can enter a person's "already active nervous system that is a substraft of the individual's past experience, culture, anticipation, and emotions" (48), and this amalgamation of factors is present in Helene's experience on the train. The fear of and distaste for a past consisting of her mother's prostitution and southern racial prejudices manifests itself in Helene's response to the white conductor, his look, his words and their absence. Uprooted from the middle-class life she creates for herself in the north, Helene is nervous and uneasy, and she misinterprets and struggles to understand meaning: rather than wanting her proffered tickets, the conductor chastises her for being in the wrong section of the train. Similarly, it takes Helene a moment to comprehend his stare as wanting her to move (21). Uncomfortable with both her body and the situation, Helene offers the conductor a

“dazzling” and “coquettish” smile before following his orders (21). After her smile, her fellow black soldier-passengers’ once indifferent eyes appear “stricken” and “veiled”, and even Nel “look[s] away” (21-22). Judgment, as well as meaning, received not just from the white conductor, but also from the soldiers and her own daughter, is transmitted by a look, a stare, or an aversion of the eyes. The conductor passes a sweeping, impersonal judgment based solely on color and sex, he is more interested in looking at the wax on his finger than at Helene, and he stares through her rather than seeing her or the smile. The soldiers’ eyes, on the other hand, once blank masks to a shared pain, flash angrily in recognition at the smile, and at the insubstantial, insincere, white “custard” lurking beneath Helene’s dark, bolstering dress.

Fear of external judgment then manifests itself in the physical shaking of her hands and the clenching of her stomach. And the “slip” of Helene’s hat, which obscures one of her eyes, denotes her inability to ascertain a self-acceptable individuality, or form, outside of the Bottom. Helene’s hat is also similar to the hat Sula wears upon her return to the Bottom, and both indicate that the women, who cannot see clearly, are easily viewed and judged by others. As Patricia McKee maintains in her article “Spacing and Placing Experience in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*”:

Helene must not only control her own slips but the way she spreads into someone else when men look at her. On the train south, she feels herself losing her place as Helene Wright and slipping into an identity with her mother, the whore. Then she sees herself losing her place in the men’s eyes. They reflect not Helene Wright, nor her mother, but just another black woman in sexual complicity with a white man. Once she begins to “slip”, she spreads into this generalized identity because of history, memory, and fears in the minds of men: preoccupations over which she has no control. (44)

McKee places emphasis on the word “slip” and the way it denotes loss of control. She further associates fear with history, memory, and the uncontrollable. While McKee’s observations seem accurate, she does not delve fully into the role of perception. Helene “slips” and becomes “custard” not because she is unable to control the thoughts or preoccupations of others, but because she defines herself through their looks. Helene’s problem, as C. Davis asserts, is not that “she recognizes other viewers” but that she uses “others to escape [her] own responsibility to define” herself (“Images” 325). Helene has no self-defined core or center, and so it is easy for her to fragment into the varying perceptions around her before collapsing entirely into an indefinable, unrecognizable “custard.” Her fear overwhelms her, and as she glances around her, with no greater defenses than a heavy dress, trembling hands, and a half-obsured eye, she sees only “whore”, “gal”, and “custard.” In the Bottom, it is not necessarily that Helene can control others’ opinions, it is simply that she prefers the reflections she sees there. Each “definition” of herself, including those given by her husband and neighbors, is merely a permeable, vacant reflection made distasteful when perceived outside of the familiar confines of the Bottom. Presented through the eyes of others with so many potential forms of herself, from wife to mother, daughter, gal, custard, black woman, and weak woman, Helene’s inability to interpret herself causes her to remain as fragmented and incomplete as she is perceived. These exchanges of sight, sound, and language, which are misunderstood and misinterpreted, become physically visible in the portrayal and behavior of Helene’s body. Assailed by too many negative perceptions and lacking a unity, her body is the perfect receptacle for external and cultural pain and judgment, and

it becomes and remains something indefinable, incomplete, and fragmented, as Helene absorbs and adopts the perceptions of those around her.

Mr. Cosey's absent body, to a greater extent than Helene's gelatinous one, is also consistently acted upon throughout *Love*. As mentioned, the novel's chapter titles encompass some of the various roles he plays in people's lives, but much like the many perspectives projected onto and accepted by Helene, the different views of the deceased Mr. Cosey only serve to fragment him further, rather than providing a complete image. Instead of being able to "transcend" his absent body, as Cotton's statement implies, Mr. Cosey is equally as prone to others' perceptions as Helene. Furthermore, part of Mr. Cosey's image includes not just perceptions of his personality or of his roles in others' lives but also the lingering scents, sounds, and clothes of his absent body. Readers hear his voice only through the reminiscings of characters such as Vida, Sandler, Christine, Heed, and even L. Speaking to Sandler of his son Billy, Cosey claims, "'Maybe he [Billy] was somebody else and I made him my...shadow. And now I'm thinking *I* don't understand anybody. So why should anybody understand me?'" (43). Cosey laments his failure to understand his dead son, which progresses into his belief that he himself is indecipherable. Ironically, throughout the text Cosey does remain a shadow, and his voice and words are the basis for manipulation and skewed interpretation. L claims, "*If I'm real still and listening carefully I can hear his voice. You'd think with all that strength, he'd be a bass. But, no. My man is a tenor*" (106). L, who haunts the novel herself, sits waiting to be haunted by a wisp of Mr. Cosey's voice and even claims him as "her man." L and Sandler's speculations and memories are indicative of their own preoccupations rather than Mr. Cosey's. Sandler remembers fragments of conversations

that he feels are significant, and they then become relevant to the reader. Similarly, L conveys the sounds of Mr. Cosey's voice as she hears and interprets it. Finally, the idea of an absent man overwhelming characters with his voice and intangible presence is again reminiscent of *Heart of Darkness* when Marlow claims, "'He [Kurtz] lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived – a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence'" (117). Both Cosey's and Kurtz's bodies become "shadows" as characters strive to hear their voices. Their presence in the novels and after death is consistent, pervasive, and even sinister, and their lingering voices begin to pollute the spaces around them.

Like his voice, Cosey's smell and clothing are equally interpretable, and Junior notes the scent of his aftershave wafting through his former house on Monarch Street (119). The aftershave is itself a mask and is a scent used and adopted by Mr. Cosey rather than a natural part of his body, and much like the portrait-photograph above Heed's bed, the aftershave is merely a representation. As well as discovering his scent, Junior also finds some of Mr. Cosey's clothes:

She stroked ties and shirts in the closet; smelled his shoes; rubbed her cheek on the sleeve of his seersucker jacket. Then, finding a stack of undershorts, she took off the red suit, slipped into the shorts, and lay on the sofa. [...] Later, on her way back to Heed's room, Junior looked over her shoulder toward the door – still ajar – and saw the cuff of a white shirt sleeve, his hand closing the door. Junior laughed, knowing as she did that he did too. (119)

Almost in an attempt to resurrect him, Junior breathes life into Mr. Cosey. Like the scent that she follows, though, the clothes she finds are merely a mask and serve only to cover the man who wore them, but by wearing his shorts, Junior provides a tangible

form for Mr. Cosey's lifeless, absent body. Smell, touch, and shape are all added to the one-dimensional portrait above Heed's bed, and they too both solidify and obscure an "outline" of Mr. Cosey. After seeing his portrait and smelling his aftershave, Junior falls asleep, and she eventually has a recurring dream from her childhood, involving a faceless man, an apple tree, and snakes:

Sleep came down so fast it was only in dreaming that she felt the new peculiar thing: protected. A faint trace of relief [...]; when upright snakes on tiny feet lay in wait, their green tongues begging her to come down from the tree. Once in a while there was someone beneath the branches standing apart from the snakes, and although she could not see who it was, his being there implied rescue. So she had endured the nightmares, even entered them, for a glimpse of the stranger's face. She never saw it, and eventually he disappeared along with the upright snakes. But here, now, deep in sleep, her search seemed to have ended. The face hanging over her new boss's bed must have started it. A handsome man with a G.I. Joe chin and a reassuring smile that pledged endless days of hot, tasty food; kind eyes that promised to hold a girl steady on his shoulder while she robbed apples from the highest branch. (29-30)

Junior craves a security and a stability that have been missing from her life. Food, love, and safety have all been inconsistent and sporadic, and that inconsistency soon manifests itself in her nightmare. Junior is haunted by her upbringing in The Settlement, "a planet away from One Monarch Street" (33), as well as by her time spent in the government institution, "Correctional." As a child, she befriends a boy named Peter Paul, and for a Christmas present, she gives him a cottonmouth snake from The Settlement. He, in return, gives her not only crayons, but "crayon-colored dreams" (57). When her aggressive, belligerent uncles discover that she has given away a snake, or what they consider to be a piece of The Settlement, they literally wake her from her dreams and begin to chase her in a truck, running over and deforming her feet with its tires. The snake, then, represents for Junior as much as for Adam and Eve, a loss of innocence and

a gaining of, perhaps, an unwanted type of knowledge. The gift of crayons and the dream they bring are replaced by a knife, a nightmare, and the knowledge of family members “who preferred the company of a snake to a girl” (59). And, rather than the crayon-colored dreams influenced by both Peter Paul’s gift and the “Jesus Saves” pillow on which she used to sleep, Junior’s dreams are usurped by feelings of unease and loss.

Violence and pain replace fleeting images of colorful security, and Junior’s one hope for safety is represented by a blank face. However, “as soon as she saw the stranger’s portrait she knew she was home. She had dreamed him her first night [at Monarch Street], had ridden his shoulders through an orchard of green Granny apples heavy and thick on the boughs” (60). Her dreams at Monarch Street, though, are no less sinister despite her feeling of being “home.” The fact that she is “robbing” the apples and that the single tree has developed into an orchard implies wrong-doing and overwhelming temptation. Junior literally replaces the blank face in her dreams with Mr. Cosey’s, simultaneously filling in one face and applying meaning to another. His “G.I. Joe chin” further represents the toy she stole as a child (59) that was eventually, in turn, “taken” from her (156), and her claims that Mr. Cosey is “more understanding than any G.I. Joe” (116) implies that she has somehow commandeered or stolen Mr. Cosey away from Heed and that he is a “doll” to be acted upon. The values associated with dolls in Morrison’s novels are elaborated upon in chapter three’s discussion of *Jazz*. Mellard claims that Junior’s desires even progress to the point where she views herself eventually “possessing the house on Monarch Street” (250). Her dream, which incorporates the pain of crushed toes, stolen G.I. Joe dolls, and snakes, illustrates loneliness and a lingering, child-like urge to be provided for and protected. For Junior,

Cosey becomes an imaginary friend or an accomplice, watching her, aiding her, and providing a justification for her actions, and because “no one understands” Mr. Cosey, or perhaps because he fails to understand himself, it is easy for others to fill in his outline, or to provide substance for his shadow with their own dreams, fears, and desires. Overall, despite their malleability, Cosey and Kurtz’s absent bodies as well as Helene’s present body, become all-consuming to those around them and epitomize Pater’s claim of both “invading” and being “invaded.” Mr. Cosey’s physical absence allows others not only to make conjectures, but to use his body as a vehicle for their pain or memories, and the image of Mr. Cosey remains fragmented throughout *Love*.

As opposed to Mr. Cosey and Helene, in *Sula* Eva attempts to re-shape her own body, her past, and others’ memories. Directionless, helpless, and impoverished after her husband BoyBoy’s departure, Eva is “confused and desperately hungry” (32). Eventually, “in the almost total darkness, her shins and teeth freezing, her nostrils assailed, she shook her head as though to juggle her brains around, then said aloud, ““Uh uh. Nooo”” (34). In the outhouse, with her unwell infant son Plum, Eva is blinded by darkness, confined by smell and poverty, and is even bereft of coherent thoughts. While her body is physically whole, all other aspects of her life remain as disjointed as the “pebbles” she urges out of the constipated Plum. In that moment, however, she does achieve a totality in the rejection of her current life as all of her senses and perceptions combine to say, ““Uh uh.”” Eva then temporarily leaves both the town and her children to find a solution for their situation. Eventually returning to the Bottom with a missing leg, Eva rejects her past life where she was acted upon by poverty and BoyBoy, and

proceeds to enjoy a more selective interaction with the neighborhood, welcoming or ejecting people into or out of her home and weaving stories about her missing limb.

While Helene confines her past to New Orleans and restricts any uncomfortable memories and fears in the cleanliness of her home and in the enclosure of her body in layers of garments, Eva displays her past through her body and even, as Baker claims, “converts her very body into a dismembered instrument of defiance” (241). For Eva, her body, surroundings, and history are inextricably linked to manipulating people’s perceptions rather than accepting them, and she controls sight and stories to the extent that they affect pain, memory, and the spaces surrounding them. The confusion and pain of Eva in the outhouse is then contrasted with and rejected by the Eva who is “sovereign” (30) in her house.² No longer confined by the outhouse or by one of her limbs, Eva physically tries to surround herself with spaciousness while simultaneously limiting the space of those around her and dictating the forms others are to take. Respected and obeyed, she exerts control over the lives of those around her, drawing orphans, newlyweds, family, and men into her ever-expanding home. Perched on top of a wheelchair-like wagon, displaying her remaining “glamorous” leg, Eva entertains a variety of visitors:

The wagon was so low that children who spoke to her standing up were eye level with her, and adults, standing or sitting, had to look down at her. But they didn’t know it. They all had the impression that they were looking up at her, up into the soft open distances of her eyes, up into the soft black of her nostril and up at the crest of her chin. (31)

² For a full discussion on Helene’s and Eva’s homes, see Patricia McKee’s article “Spacing and Placing in *Sula*.” It might also be useful to consider GerShun Avilez’s article “Housing the Black Body” alongside McKee’s, as well as Baker’s “When Lindberg Sleeps with Bessie Smith” and Carsten and Hugh-Jones’s *About the House*.

Eva is so preoccupied with rejecting pain and maintaining the privacy of her own semi-displayed history, that she permits her eyes to show only “distances.” They remain at different levels for different people, and rather than reflecting, defining, or answering questions, her eyes instead “open” into vast possibilities. Her tendency to dominate even compels, “under her distant eye [...] her own children to grow up stealthily” (41), further indicating that her view and the perspective it forces are nearly inescapable. Eva’s “gaze” is an embodiment of the stereotypically white, male gaze inflicted on characters such as Helene, and through her gaze, stories, and missing leg, Eva is able to dictate perception.

While Eva’s propensity for domination certainly involves her missing leg and an absence of solid explanation, her “sovereign” view is also clearly illustrated through her treatment of others:

Slowly each boy came out of whatever cocoon he was in at the time his mother or somebody gave him away, and accepted Eva’s view, becoming in fact as well as in name a dewey – joining with the other two to become a trinity with a plural name...inseparable, loving no one and nothing but themselves. (38)

Physically and mentally inseparable, the adopted deweys become defined by the absence of individuality and the loss of identity, and they further exemplify the astonishing power Eva’s “view” wields. Through words, naming, and a seemingly irrefutable gaze, Eva re-births a history and a monstrous single identity for the deweys, who emerge transformed from their “cocoons.” Commenting on the power of the white male gaze in *The Bluest Eye*, Geurrero’s observations are applicable to Eva and the deweys where her “look” is capable of conveying “an absence of humanity” (766). As well as renaming and reappointing individuality, development, space, and perception, Eva also feels it is

her right as a mother, in her own home, to kill Plum. Entertaining a constant “flock” of men, murdering her heir, and surrounding herself with those she pretends to mother, Eva temporarily retains control in her castle-like home; however, in killing Plum, Eva acts only to spare herself, and Baker claims that Eva “rationalizes” the murder “in the name of ‘personal space’” (242). The actions previously taken in the outhouse as a young mother, which include the possible sacrifice of her leg, stem from a determination to “survive whole” and with dignity, but after killing Plum, she can no longer distinguish between love and manipulation, and her household becomes as oppressive as Medallion.

Eva’s reign as “sovereign” soon ends when she cannot prevent her daughter Hannah from burning to death, despite throwing her body on top of her, and Sula then usurps Eva’s place in the household. Banished to a nursing home, Eva’s “once beautiful leg had no stocking and the foot was in a slipper. Nel wanted to cry – not for Eva’s milk-dull eyes or her floppy lips, but for the once proud foot, accustomed for over half a century to a fine well-laced shoe [that was] now stuffed gracelessly into a pink terrycloth slipper” (167). Eva’s eyes, the varying states of adornment of her remaining leg and the handling of her absent leg reflect her actions. Although her solitary leg and her gaze were formerly testaments to her potential sacrifice and to her dominating perspective, they currently serve only as reminders that she was ultimately powerless to save her children, and her body, which once demonstrated love and strength, appears almost grotesque after her manipulations result in death. The deaths of all those who Eva claims to have “birthed” results in a sterility in Eva’s life that is discussed further in chapter three. Overall, the epiphany Eva experiences in the outhouse is altered, along with her body, into a justification for manipulation and control, and the love shown in

the outhouse is replaced by a “liquid trail of hate” (36). Her fragmented body, which is at once absent and present, comes to reflect not just the loss of a leg but the loss of love and acceptance.

Finally, in *Love* L seems to be an amalgamation of Eva, Mr. Cosey, and even Conrad’s Kurtz, and she is simultaneously bodiless, pervasive, and manipulative. As the primary, omniscient narrator of *Love*, L begins the novel subtly, yet controversially. She no longer speaks but “hums” and “*words dance in [her] head to the music in [her] mouth*” (3). Her hum is also her “*way of objecting to how the century is turning out*” (4), and while she claims not to possess certain “*kinds of power*” (4), the novel is laden with the results of her actions. Born “*straight into rainwater*” and claiming to be “*marked*” (64) by it L, her humming, and their influences immerse the novel, and much like a “current” (76), carry readers and characters through a conflicting tale of pain and love. Similarly to Conrad’s Kurtz, L’s presence is felt through her words. In *Heart of Darkness*, as Marlow questions Kurtz’s Russian, harlequin-like companion as to how he manages to remain so long with Kurtz in the wilderness, the Russian replies, “““ I went a little farther [...] then still a little farther – till I had gone so far that I don’t know how I’ll get back””” (90). The Russian maintains that he has followed Kurtz and his voice into a literal and figurative wilderness. In *Love*, L, who “*like[s] a good storm*” (64), lures readers into her story, posturing, “*So why not swim a little farther and a little farther still? What’s the deep to you?*” (4). Soft-spoken and poetic, L’s words at times seem hypnotic, similar to the music or waves that she describes, and Scarry maintains that “the translation of pain into power is ultimately a transformation of body into voice” (45). L’s bodiless, hummed siren call, much like Kurtz’s voice, prods readers to

immerse themselves in a multi-faceted story of pain that questions the nature and expression of love. Despite her claims that she is merely “*background*” music and that her humming only “*encourages people*” (4), her flowing, tantalizing, manipulative call shapes the novel’s events and the telling of them, and nothing she says is ever “idle” (98).

Similarly to Eva, L, who was once a cook and a part of the clockwork efficiency of the hotel (103), exerts an almost dictator-like presence throughout the novel. Her words are suggestive and opinionated and despite the story’s many subtleties or expressions of pain and love, L claims, “*It’s trash: just another story made to scare wicked females and correct unruly children. But it’s all I have. I know I need something else. Something better. Like a story that shows how brazen women can take a good man down. I can hum to that*” (10). The phrase “good man”, when repeated by Junior and applied to Mr. Cosey, remains conflicted (118, 156). Even L, by the end of the novel, maintains Cosey “*was an ordinary man ripped, like the rest of us [...] by wrath and love*” (200), which contradicts her initial claims for his unequivocal “goodness.” Furthermore, as the narrative unfolds, “brazen” women are nowhere to be found. Beginning with the little girl that falls into horse dung that Mr. Cosey witnesses and is influenced by as a young man (45), many of the females in the novel seem almost tragic figures, alienated, ridiculed, or persecuted by society or their own families. May, Cosey’s daughter-in-law, first loses a husband, then respect, and gradually her sanity until even her daughter leaves her. Junior, although still a teenager, gets lost in a variety of failed governmental systems and is tormented by her uncles as a child. Julia, Cosey’s first wife, is dead and barely appears in the novel. Celestial, Cosey’s mistress, is also

dead but very much present and seems forlorn, abandoned, and misunderstood. As for Heed and Christine, they face a variety of judgments based on race, class, sex, and age throughout the novel, and still, L refers to them all as “brazen.”

Meanwhile, in a novel full of manipulations and manipulators, L and her wordless humming have far greater effects on readers and characters alike than any of the other protagonists except, perhaps, for Mr. Cosey. In a novel where characters are obsessed with the absent body of a dead man, readers only discover at the end of *Love* that L has poisoned Mr. Cosey with foxglove (201). Noting that “*foxglove grows waist high around the gazebo*” (7) and disagreeing with the contents of his original will, which leave everything to Celestial, L “*had to stop him. Had to*” (200) and claims, “*There wasn’t but one solution*” (201). Anissa Janine Wardi claims that “Foxglove is Morrison’s perfect metaphor for love, as the plant both restores and destroys, its beauty belying its poison. Rather than seek love’s perfection, Morrison examines love’s work, work that renews, restores, and heals” (215). Foxglove directly affects the heart and can be used either to treat or to induce heart failure. While it may possess outer beauty, a single bite from the unprocessed plant has the ability to cause death. The name “foxglove” itself derives from the plant’s finger-like appearance and has also been referred to as “bloody fingers”, “Dead Man’s Belles”, and “Witch’s Gloves.” In wanting to associate L and her actions with positive aspects of love, it seems that Wardi overlooks the fact that L does, in actuality, use foxglove to manipulate and not to heal. Wardi further claims, “L’s status as cook materializes her ‘genuine love.’ Indeed, even her acts outside of the restaurant pair food with healing” (215), and Wardi maintains that Morrison uses hands to depict “love as verb” (202). However, L’s cooking not only

poisons Mr. Cosey but burns Heed's hand (81), and the incident is a sign of what later becomes a crippling deformity for Heed. L also quells a fire in Christine's room by pouring sugar on it, and the novel's association with both positive and negative aspects of food is examined in greater detail in chapter two; however, her wordless actions only result in turning the fire into "caramelized evil" (134). Furthermore, in a novel where a teenage girl's hands are tied up during a gang rape (46), where Romen's hands are bloodied after a fight, where the local cannery ruins hands, where "Heed has closed her fingers" and "Christine has decorated hers" (141), and where the ghostly figure of Celestial pleadingly sings, "*Come back, baby. Take me by the hand*" (202), it is difficult to associate hands with expressing love, rather than with expressing suffering, longing, and unfulfilled love. And, instead of being the conveyor of pure, healing, or "genuine" love, L literally and figuratively takes matters and the novel into her own hands. Through her cooking and commentary, rather than expressing or assuaging pain, L assigns and assesses both. Her bodiless hum, which frames the novel and is included in both its opening and closing sentences, also sets the parameters for pain and love. However, rather than "transcending" her absent body and its limits, as Cotton claims, L chooses instead to immerse herself in her own fragmented story and prefers to remain as entranced by the equally bodiless Mr. Cosey as all of the other characters.

Sula: A Different Perspective

With the older generations of *Sula* and *Love*, there is a tendency to place great emphasis on the presence or absence of bodies and their pain, and it is difficult for protagonists, even in death or dismemberment, to move beyond their bodies in order to achieve the unity of epiphany. The next cohort of characters, however, illustrates not

only the progression of pain, from external influences and from one generation to the next, but also shows an ability to dissolve both pain and the past. Even Junior in *Love* experiences moments where her body is irrelevant. Before her feet are run-over by her uncles, “Peter Paul and Junior were not interested in each other’s bodies”, and they even question the meaning of “colored” (56); however, it seems from the moment Junior’s feet become webbed she, as well as others, develops a preoccupation with her body. From the beginning of the novel, Sandler notes “the angle of her hip” (13) and “reckoned her knees and thighs were stinging from the cold her tiny skirt exposed her to” (15). Christine, too, when first seeing Junior, cannot help but “put her own body of forty – even thirty – years ago next to the girl’s” (22-23). Romen also assesses Junior’s body (114), and as Sandler notes, he gazes at it with a look of “first ownership” (112). The overwhelming presence of Junior’s body and the focus on its appearance occur after her feet become deformed. Her perpetual attempts to conceal her feet with boots only serve to highlight her other features, and her body becomes a literal representation of pain. For Junior, however, a brief epiphanic moment occurs at the end of the novel after she has abandoned Christine and Heed at the now derelict and vacant hotel. She returns to Monarch Street alone where Romen lifts her “misshapen foot”, licks her “mangled toes”, and then is “surprised to see how dead her sci-fi eyes” are (179). The former light in Junior’s eyes, far from positive, gleamed from a feeling of being forever on-edge, from protecting herself from her uncles, from Correctional, and from trying to make it on her own. After Romen licks her deformed foot, acknowledging and sharing her pain, Junior experiences a sensation that is “brand-new, completely alien, [and] it invaded her, making her feel wide open and whole, already approved and confirmed by the lollipop

lick” (196). Her pain dissipates in a new instance of “jittery brightness” (179) where love has potentially replaced pain. Her feet are no longer an object of shame, abuse, or fragmentation, and the incident harkens back to a lost childhood with the innocence of a “lollipop lick.” While Junior’s epiphany is brief and even temporary, she experiences a moment of wholeness, free from pain, and full of acceptance. Her epiphany involves not just a releasing of her own bodily pain, but also a recognition of the absence of Mr. Cosey. Suddenly, the “Good Man” from her dreams has “vanished” (196), and Junior is able to experience a moment of wholeness, unity, and acceptance. She is in the house, left with a feeling of “jittery brightness”, no longer looking for the lingering smell of aftershave, and no longer feeling haunted by the past or Mr. Cosey. Romen’s acceptance of Junior, however, is short-lived when he discovers her abandonment of Heed and Christine at the hotel, and by the end of the novel, Junior’s epiphany remains open-ended as Heed and Christine discuss how to handle her and whether to accept her (198).

As opposed to Junior, Nel and Sula’s epiphanies are the result of a self-examined progression begun in childhood. Nel’s self-evaluation begins before she meets Sula when she travels to New Orleans with her mother. As Helene asks her to “pull” her nose, “Nel sat on the red-velvet sofa listening to her mother but remembering the smell and the tight, tight hug of the woman in yellow who rubbed burned matches over her eyes” (28). Nel has begun to process the events of the day, beginning with the unexpected, pleasurable sensation of a hug from her barely remembered grandmother, the “woman in yellow.” The feeling of comfort is contrasted with the reprimands from her mother and the uncomfortable sensation of “pulling” her nose. In other words,

unconditional acceptance is compared to the rejection of her appearance. Later that night:

Nel lay in bed thinking of her trip. She remembered clearly the urine running down and into her stockings until she learned how to squat properly; the disgust on the face of the dead woman and the sound of the funeral drums. It had been an exhilarating trip but a fearful one. She had been frightened of the soldiers' eyes on the train, the black wreath on the door, the custard pudding she believed was under her mother's heavy dress [...]. She got out of bed and lit the lamp to look in the mirror [...]. She looked for a long time and suddenly a shiver ran through her. (28)

When Nel turns on the light in her room, it is in an attempt to acknowledge her fears and to examine her newly discovered perceptions. As opposed to Helene, Nel realizes her own eyes, not the soldiers', the conductor's, or even her mother's represent sight, and all of Nel's abilities of perception come together. The colors of New Orleans, the red, yellow, and black adornments of her grandmother and her grandmother's house combine with smells, sights, sounds, and the feeling of a hug. Suddenly, Nel's body becomes everything and nothing. Mitchie states, "The mirror is itself [...] simultaneously presence and absence, depiction, inversion, and distortion of the body (vanity/ surface) and of an attempt to move beyond the body (reflection/ contemplation)" (8). Mitchie maintains that mirror-gazing both denies and asserts the physical presence of the body. According to Helene's example, the body is something to contain and to attempt to manipulate; however, the freely given hug, viewing her mother's body as custard, and Nel's inability to urinate "properly" by the side of the road indicate that the status of the body is based solely on perception and is difficult to contain.

The "shiver" that eventually accompanies Nel's realizations is contrasted with Helene's clenched stomach and trembling hands. Unlike Helene's fragmented

clenchings and tremblings that occur as a result of surrounding looks and judgments, Nel's shiver is unified and whole, and it occurs as she examines herself through her own eyes. The amalgamation of sensations and perceptions eventually leads Nel to the tenuous conclusion:

‘I’m me,’ she whispered. ‘Me.’

Nel didn’t know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant.

‘I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me.’

Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering like power, like joy, like fear. (28)

At the end of her “exhilarating” and arduous day, Nel is left with her core. All pretenses and outside perceptions dissipate, she is not hindered or obscured by heavy clothing or veiled eyes, and she is presented with a clear, unfragmented image of herself. She rejects the projected definitions of herself as “daughter” and “Nel”, and she locates her self, not through or in the eyes of others, but in her own. For as reaffirming and unifying as her childhood epiphany is, however, it remains incomplete. She must find “a negotiation of and balance between the individual and the people around her”, and she must further realize, as Quashie continues, that “selfhood is an issue of communality” (187). While she is not bound by others’ opinions or judgments, she is still confined and contained by the frame of the mirror. She has acknowledged all the various aspects of her day, but she still needs to discover how and where her newfound “Me” can be accepted and integrated into the community.

For as personally unifying as Nel’s experience is, it is lonely and solitary, and she has yet to discover the acceptance she later experiences in her friendship with Sula. The loneliness of both girls is expressed through their childhood daydreams:

[Nel] studied the poplars and fell easily into a picture of herself lying on a flowered bed, tangled in her own hair, waiting for some fiery prince. He approached but never quite arrived. But always, watching the dream with her, were some smiling sympathetic eyes. (51)

Nel's daydream includes a "picture of herself", and the consolidated image is similar to her mirror-gazing. In this instance, however, her vision includes participants: a "fiery prince" and a "sympathetic" co-watcher. Unlike Helene's experiences where looks and gazes signify fluctuating judgment, the watcher in Nel's daydream is companionable and permanent, as implied by "always." A less sinister version of Junior's dream in *Love*, the anonymous someone participating in Nel's vision is "quite like the dreamer [and] share[s] the delight of the dream" (51). Nel's dream, as an extension of her experiences in New Orleans, is self-assured, yet lonely. In comparison, Sula's "Technicolored" daydream involves "galloping through her own mind on a grey-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses in full view of someone who share[s] both the taste and the speed" (52). While Nel remains stationary, Sula is in perpetual motion. Sula too, though, desires a companion, not only to watch, but to share the sensations of taste, smell, and speed. The major difference between the two girls' dreams, however, is that Nel is "tangled" in her own hair intent on examining herself while Sula is determined to examine the world around her. Despite not having met, the two girls experience a companionable peace or acceptance in their daydreams. The imagined ideals also seem to reflect Morrison's comment that "there is a certain kind of peace that [...] is the dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open one" (*The Dancing Mind* 7). Sula and Nel have separate daydreams that illustrate their individuality, and yet, they

have “made the acquaintance” (*Sula* 51) of another mind that can watch or participate without judgment.

Houston A. Baker notes that “Sula and Nel, for all their apparent bonding, do not share a single perspective [...] how very different their dreams are!” (246). Baker further comments:

Nel, who passively and quite conventionally by the bourgeois gender standards of her heritage awaits the fiery prince, is a natural for the role into which Helene Wright has “scrunched” her. She will be wife and mother, not an artistic tracer of innovative designs.

Sula, by contrast, will be the daring heir of her grandmother and mother’s easy sexuality [...] in an absurdly boring world where “a little touching every day” may provide the only relief – and release. Nel will shout cautions while Sula climbs trees. (249)

For as tempting as it may be to label Sula as adventurous and Nel as passively conformist, especially based on descriptions of Helene and Eva, it is more textually accurate to recognize that Sula frequently imitates Nel and that the girls’ daydreams occur before they experience “all their apparent bonding.” For instance, it is Nel who first leaves the Bottom and initiates a journey where she can be both an individual and a part of the community, and later it is Nel who first mistakenly believes that she can find acceptance through a man. Sula soon follows suit and only leaves the Bottom after Nel is married, and when Sula later sleeps with Nel’s husband Jude, it is because she and Nel “had always shared” (119). Like Nel, Sula too mistakenly believes she can dispel her loneliness and find acceptance through a man and becomes as “possessive” (131) of Ajax, the only man who holds her interest for an extended period of time, as Nel is of Jude. Overall, in terms of interpreting Nel and Sula’s childhood daydreams, or Sula and

Nel themselves, it seems more accurate to note Nel as the experienced onlooker; as someone who has already tasted and smelled what Sula seeks to sample.

Once the girls do meet in person, the “intoxicating loneliness” that inspires their daydreams ends, and they become inseparable (51). For Sula and Nel, however, the potentially redemptive aspects of a companionable watcher are later overshadowed by the physicality inherent in both dreams, and the emphasis on the senses translates into a preoccupation with the body and its pain. The first instance where the body and pain begin to interfere with the acceptance Sula and Nel have found in one another occurs early in their friendship. One day after school Nel is bullied, and in an effort to protect her, Sula cuts off part of her own finger. Sula’s sacrifice, which is comparable to Eva’s lost leg and accomplished with “Eva’s paring knife” (54), is a calculated, determined response to the potential pain of her friend. It is also a calculated, determined desire to express love, and it results in the only time Sula “held onto a mood for weeks” as well as the shared view that “in the safe harbor of each other’s company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things” (55). This episode, for as violently reaffirming as it seems, becomes entangled with events directly following it, and the instance of bodily fragmentation is translated into misunderstanding. Sula’s severed finger becomes, as C. Henderson claims, “simultaneously [a] sign of wounding and [a] sign of healing” (7). Sula believes she “earned not Nel’s gratitude but her disgust” (141), and at the moment of dismemberment, Nel looks at Sula’s face, which “seemed miles and miles away” (55). For Nel, the event dispels her fears of being chased and teased, and it perpetuates her earlier epiphany in New Orleans. She becomes immune, not only to the bullying, but to

the physical pain of her mother's continuous insistence on "pulling" her nose with a clothespin and to the "suffering" of the "hateful hot comb" for her hair (55), and the schoolyard incident becomes another step forward in her journey toward liberation and epiphany. The incident for Sula, however, is preceded by hearing her mother Hannah and two friends determine that children are "'a pain'" (56). The consensus is followed by her mother's claim that, "'I love Sula. I just don't like her'" (57). This rejection is the first time that Sula appraises herself through another, and the incident results in a transformation different from Nel's. Sula's eyes, once "steady and clean as rain" (53), start to "sting" (57) after hearing her mother's words, and she is later able to watch her mother burn to death with "interest" (78) and without any attempt at intervention. Additionally, her birthmark, a symbol of fragmentation and judgment, begins to mutate and get "darker" (74). While the schoolyard incident allows Nel to continue to find acceptance and to strive towards a balance between her self and the community, for Sula, the calculated mutilation of her body results in fragmentation and isolation, and both girls must eventually try to reclaim a mutual and unified acceptance of and with each other before they can dissolve the pain present in their lives.

As the girls mature, their preoccupations with their bodies increase, and Nel meets Jude. She gradually begins to attribute Sula's qualities as unconditional, all-accepting watcher to him, forgetting that the watcher and "fiery prince" of her daydreams are two separate individuals. Nel is first drawn to Jude "when she discovers his pain" and realizes that he "could see himself taking shape in her eyes" (83). Jude's "pain" stems from the rejection of not being permitted to work on the construction of the New Road in town. Physically capable and yearning to contribute, Jude's body is

rejected in favor of “thin-armed white boys” and “bull-necked Greeks and Italians” (82). Jude then seeks out Nel, not in order to regain or solidify his manhood, but to “care about his hurt” (82). Nel on the other hand, not only sees Jude’s pain, but sees marriage as a possible perpetuation of the epiphany begun in her grandmother’s mirror. With Jude, she experiences “a new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly” (84), and marriage seems to present a way of being both an individual and a part of the community. As with the schoolyard incident and Eva’s experience in the outhouse, the urge to dispel another’s pain at first seems selfless and altruistic; however, as pain becomes further entangled with the body and perception, fragmentation and separation ensue. It becomes evident at their wedding that Nel’s feelings toward Jude are misplaced, and “the veil she wore was too heavy to allow her to feel the core of the kiss he pressed on her head” (85). The “heavy veil” is reminiscent of her mother’s clothing on the train, and it indicates a barrier as well as an inability to fully experience Jude’s kisses. The word “pressed” reinforces the weight of “heavy” and implies something forced or one-sided rather than mutual or reciprocal. Finally, glancing up at Jude for “one more look of reassurance”, Nel’s eyes instead notice Sula leaving, and “even from the rear” Nel knows that Sula “was smiling” (85). Nel does not need to “see” Sula’s face to know that she is smiling, just as the two girls did not need to meet to be participants in each others’ dreams, and perception and the body are occasionally irrelevant to Nel and Sula’s interactions with one another. In comparison, Nel and Jude’s relationship is rife with fragmentation and images of the body, pain, and obscured perception from the beginning. And even though Nel seeks a continuation of her childhood epiphany with him, she loses sight of the “Me” in the mirror and focuses

instead on the fragmented bodily perceptions of her newly felt neck, lips, and smile (84), as well as on Jude's pain.

Beginning with their courtship and wedding, Nel's relationship with Jude is fraught with bodily preoccupations and a pandering to pain that culminates in Jude sleeping with Sula. After Nel discovers them, the physical act of sex is less bothersome to her than where everyone's eyes are looking. She is aware that Sula and Jude do not look at one another during or after the act, that Jude looks up at her when he and Sula are discovered, and that Sula does not even glance at her. Nel is horrified, too, not by Sula's nakedness, which seems "somehow" natural (105), but by Jude's gaze. She notes, twice, that his "eyes looked like the soldiers' that time on the train when [her] mother turned to custard" (105, 106). Despite nearly a lifetime of trying to establish her individuality, Nel realizes that rather than seeing her "singly", Jude has seen nothing except her ability to adapt to his own bodily pains and needs. After being caught with Sula, Jude leaves, and Nel "looks around for a place to be" (107):

Hunched down in the small bright room Nel waited. Waited for the oldest cry. A scream not for others [...] but a deeply personal cry for one's own pain. A loud, strident: "Why me?" She waited. The mud shifted, the leaves stirred, the smell of overripe green things enveloped her and announced the beginnings of her very own howl.

But it did not come.

The odor evaporated; the leaves were still, the mud settled. And finally there was nothing, just a flake of something dry and nasty in her throat. (108)

Nel cannot complete her epiphany because she cannot identify her pain. Rather than dissolving her pain in a full-bodied and formless "shiver", Nel's false epiphany instead results in her pain taking greater shape. She refuses to examine or "look" at it, and overcome by her fear of the unknown, she begins to sweat (109). Her senses, in the

movement of the mud and leaves and in the smell of “overripe green things”, begin to merge, but unlike her experience in the mirror, her fears overwhelm her and take shape as a flake in her throat and a gray ball in the corner of her vision (109). Rather than heightening her perceptions or dispelling them, Nel’s thwarted epiphany only results in paralyzing her. Her vision becomes polluted by the floating, weightless grey ball of fur (109), and her voice is impeded by the flake in her throat. Any “Me” that accompanied Nel’s “shiver” in childhood has dissolved, and her core has been replaced with the forms of a pain that Nel cannot yet identify.

Later in the novel, after sleeping with Jude, Sula has an experience comparable to Nel’s childhood epiphany:

No one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand. There was only her mood and whim, and if that was all there was, she decided to turn the naked hand toward it, discover it and let others become as intimate with their own selves as she was. (121)

The description of Sula’s quest for self-discovery is “naked” and almost raw, and the “version of herself” that she seeks is similar to Nel’s childhood rejection of anything other than “Me.” What Nel hopes to see and Sula hopes to touch, however, are for both characters, sensations of individual, internal unity, which is further reflected in Sula’s independent yet isolationist comment of “let[ting] others become as intimate with their own selves as she was.” Sula embarks on an epiphanic path to find a self-acceptable center, but in order to “survive whole,” she must also find a way to disband perception and reconcile her public and private lives.

After her brief epiphany Sula meets Ajax, and similarly to Nel’s relationship with Jude, Sula begins to examine herself through his eyes. One day, after spending

time with him, she looks into “the mirror, finger-tracing the laugh lines round her mouth and trying to decide whether she was good-looking or not” (131). This glance into the mirror is a stark contrast to both Nel’s childhood epiphany and to Sula’s “ungloved hand.” It not only refutes Sula’s supposed ambivalence towards others’ perceptions, but it is also a reminder of when she allowed Hannah’s perceptions of her to “send her flying up the stairs” as a child (57). Sula does not see her self for herself, but much like Helene’s tendencies, tries to envision her body through Ajax’s eyes, and she momentarily believes she has found a balance between self and community. After looking in the mirror, in the hopes of pleasing him she next cleans the house, washes the sheets, applies perfume, and ties a green ribbon into her hair (131). The green ribbon further symbolizes her temporary conformity and a shielding of the nakedness she sought to “unglove.” The color and the ribbon are reminiscent of Shadrack, the town’s World War I veteran who experiences shellshock, and the orderly with the green uniform, who confines him in a mental institution. The ribbon is also reminiscent of Nel’s green coat, of the green grass she and Sula used in childhood to conceal their secret diggings, and of Jude’s last name “Greene.” It also harkens back to her grandfather BoyBoy’s “laughing” woman in the “pea green dress” (36) whom he flaunts in front of Eva, and it gestures ahead to the paralyzing monotony found in the “sterile green cages” (167) of Eva’s nursing home. Ultimately, the green ribbon, especially when compared with other instances in the novel, symbolizes not only an effort to conform but an effort to conceal, and Sula’s behavior, despite her claims of autonomy and “nakedness”, is merely imitative and repetitious. Abandoning her search for unity in

favor of another's perspective, Sula becomes like the residents of the Bottom, and the preoccupation with her body truncates her epiphany.

Ajax too notes Sula's conformity. After arriving at her house and speaking with her, he gradually becomes aware of the "green ribbon shining in her hair" (133), which induces him to take her upstairs and mechanically "make love to her" (134) before permanently leaving:

Every now and then she looked around for tangible evidence of his ever having been there. [...] She could find nothing, for he had left nothing but his stunning absence. An absence so decorative, so ornate, it was difficult for her to understand how she had ever endured, without falling dead or being consumed, his magnificent presence. [...] When he was there he pulled everything toward himself. Not only her eyes and all her senses but also inanimate things seemed to exist because of him, backdrops to his presence. (134)

Ajax's departure indicates the extent to which Sula's senses are overrun. She associates everything around her – from her body to the rocking chair to the table tops - with his presence and with how they appeared to her in his presence. Even the "mirror by the door", which already seemed detrimental enough, is no longer the mirror through which she examined herself; it has now become "an altar" where Ajax "stood only for a moment to put on his cap" (134). Eventually, Sula does find a remnant of Ajax, and discovers from his driver's license that his name is actually "Albert Jacks" (135). Much like Mr. Cosey's statement to Sandler concerning his son, Sula laments, "'I didn't even know his name. And if I didn't know his name, then there is nothing I did know and I have known nothing ever at all'" (136). Her remorse is not simply confined to her misconception of his name; she proceeds to remember instances from childhood and

recognizes that despite her curiosity in life, she has never discovered anything new (136-137).

Like Nel's reaction after Jude's departure, Sula becomes paralyzed by her misunderstandings. Curled in the fetal position on her deathbed, Sula reaches the conclusion, "That's the same sun I looked at when I was twelve, the same pear trees. If I live a hundred years my urine will flow the same way, my armpits and breath will smell the same. My hair will grow from the same holes. I didn't mean anything. I never meant anything" (147). Sula notes a monotony in life where all bodily functions and perceptions are perpetually performed in the same way, and she notices sights, smells, and similarly to Nel, even comments on the "flow" of her urine. "Completely alone – where she had always wanted to be – free from the possibility of distraction" (148), Sula finally takes stock of her body and her perceptions for herself. By cataloging her body and its functions in such a manner, it initially appears as though she is fulfilling her proclamation to Eva that "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92); however, she instead begins to fragment her body from her eyes all the way to the pores from which her hair grows. As opposed to Nel's childhood epiphany, where parts and fragments are constructed into a tenuous whole, Sula's deathbed scene initially involves a deconstruction or dismemberment of the self. While Nel analyzes all the aspects of her day and the people that comprise it, choosing which parts to reject and which to accept, Sula rejects everything and decides, "All of the words and all of the smiles, every tear and every gag just something to do" (147). Nothing is unique for Sula, and her dismissal of the components that have comprised her life extend to her body itself.

This fragmentation of self is exemplified in the dream Sula has immediately following her analysis:

The Clabber Girl baking powder lady was smiling and beckoning to her, one hand under her apron. When Sula came near she disintegrated into white dust, which Sula was hurriedly trying to stuff into the pockets of her blue-flannel housecoat. The disintegration was awful to see, but worse was the feel of the powder – its starchy slipperiness as she tried to collect it by handfuls. The more she scooped, the more it billowed. At last it covered her, filled her eyes, her nose, her throat, and she woke gagging and overwhelmed with the smell of smoke. (147-148)

There is no clarity for Sula. At this moment in the novel, it seems as though she has destroyed herself, and fragmentation is evident from the cataloging of body parts to the “disintegration” of the “Clabber Girl Baking Powder lady.” By “hurriedly” trying to scoop up the powder and placing it in her pockets, it is as though Sula is trying to rebuild what has fallen apart, or at least to conceal the parts she has exposed. The word “slip” is a reminder of the description of Helene’s hat on the train, which further illustrates not only the fragmentation of Sula’s body but also the perception obscuring “billowing” that is about to envelop her. The “billowing powder”, much like Nel’s gray ball and flake, overwhelms her senses of sight, smell, and hearing. The smell of smoke that accompanies the “billowing” seems to fulfill Sula’s promise to Eva of ““Any more fires in this house, I’m lighting them! [...] Whatever’s burning in me is mine!”” (93); however, the “burning” in Sula not only involves the same smoke that consumes her mother and uncle but it is also the smoke that remains in Eva’s “hair for years” (37). Failing, so far, to recognize anything unique in her life, Sula begins to examine her pain in an effort to find something new. However, even the “variety of the pain bored her and there was nothing to do” (148). Descriptions of “fluttering”, “burning”,

“throbbing”, “waves”, “hammer strokes”, “razor edges”, and “small explosions” ultimately only exacerbate the fragmentation begun by Sula’s cataloging and further illustrate the impossibility of entertaining her (148). Boudreau claims, “Suffering [...] *unmakes* the self and calls violent attention to the practice of making and unmaking selves” (452). At this point in Sula’s reflections, she is so completely fragmented and deconstructed that even the pain gradually begins to become something separate from her. Her solitude is depicted by the boarded up window from which Eva jumps to save the burning Hannah, and it “soothed her with its sturdy termination, its unassailable finality” (148). The boarded up window guarantees an end to outside perceptions. It finally presents Sula with an opportunity for uninterrupted self-assessment, and she is literally and symbolically free from the inhibiting and judgmental gaze of the Bottom. For however fragmenting her pain and dreams might be, the boarded up window indicates that Sula has achieved a solitude rather than forced isolation, and she can at least examine herself without any external interference.

Throughout her ordeal, however, Sula maintains a connection to Nel. Not only does Nel visit Sula immediately prior to her death, but thoughts of Nel surround her deathbed experiences. Before Sula’s reflections on her fragmented self begin, she assumes Nel will ““never remember the days when we were two throats and one eye and we had no price”” (147). Sula’s comment is reminiscent of the Graie, a trinity of women from Hesiod’s *Theogeny*, who selflessly share a solitary eye and refuse to abandon one another to the fate of blindness. The ““two throats”” reaffirms the girls’ individuality and their ability to express experience differently; however, the eye shared between them represents an unobstructed view of the world where their actions possess meaning

and their thoughts can exist without judgment. For Sula and Nel, the individuality expressed through their two throats is isolationist until they can be viewed without judgment through their communal “eye.” Despite Sula’s solitude, she incorporates thoughts of Nel into her self-assessment, indicating the potential for unity and a connection with another. By the end of the scene, Sula becomes overwhelmed by her pain and for a moment fears death:

She realized, or rather, she sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn’t have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead.

Sula felt her face smiling. “Well I’ll be damned,” she thought, “it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel.” (149)

Sula’s body has finally become irrelevant. Through the total dissolution of form and pain that is found in death, Sula is no longer part of her body or prey to the unassailable boredom and judgment it instigates. Her senses too, without the distraction of her body, become free and whole. Finally, others’ opinions of her no longer matter, even in their refusal to attend to her dead body, frozen in its bored “yawn” of rigor mortis (172). As Heilbrun claims, “For women in literature death is the ultimate room of one’s own” (320). Sula is free from others’ perceptions of her, the vehicle that permitted them is irrelevant, and rather than being bored, Sula feels her new bodiless face “smiling.” Sula’s deathbed epiphany has not only allowed her to dissolve the various types of pain and fragmentation that have plagued her life, but it has also enabled her to have an experience before Nel. Sula’s final thoughts in the novel, which culminate in epiphany and the realization that she has experienced all a bodily life has to offer, end in an instance of promise, camaraderie, and acceptance, and Sula has finally found a “space and place” in which to be both herself and connected to another.

Years later, Nel reflects on their friendship and on Sula's death, and thoughts of Sula then serve as a catalyst for Nel's final epiphany, just as thoughts of Nel surrounded Sula's deathbed epiphany:

Suddenly she stopped. Her eye twitched and burned a little.

"Sula?" she whispered, gazing at the tops of the trees. "Sula?"

Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze.

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl."

It was a fine cry – loud and long – but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (174)

All of Nel's senses come together in a single, overwhelming moment where she simultaneously identifies both her pain and her connection with Sula. Instigated by an eye "twitch" reminiscent of her friend, the grey ball of fur that has accompanied Nel's sight breaks and fragments. Loss overwhelms her and comes "up into her throat", disintegrating the flake and expressing a sensation beyond language. Page believes that epiphany "comes too late" for Sula and Nel to continue their "self-development"

(*Dangerous Freedom* 83) and that:

One consequence of the characters' attempts to find meaning in a relationship with another person is that they have difficulties in maintaining workable self-concepts. Their senses of self become entangled with their quests for fulfilling relationships with one another, and in the process their identities, their relationships, their communal ties all suffer. (69-70)

Page maintains that the attempt to establish a meaningful connection with another immediately inhibits not only concepts of self but the very relationship one is trying to build, and he believes that even in epiphany, Sula and Nel are thwarted. However, it

seems more accurate to note Rigney's observation of Nel and Sula's attempts at constructing an "identity in relationship" (*Voices* 50) where they can be both individuals and have a meaningful connection with another. Even Page maintains that both Sula and Nel, through their epiphanies, "regain a glimpse of their lost unity" (*Dangerous Freedom* 68). The fragmentation they must overcome in order to reestablish their lost unity involves the pain and judgment imposed on them by both a dominant white culture as well as the surrounding black community. Their "ties" with themselves, one another, and their families are all under the crippling influence of the outside world, and in order to attain any sort of wholeness or unity, such negative perceptions and the forms that allow them must be identified and dissolved.

Boudreau claims that "pain alone does not offer salvation" and that "to acknowledge and examine pain [...] is to enter into a process whereby one gains one's full humanity" (450-451). For Sula, the examination of pain results in the acknowledgment of her body as vehicle and object, and she is only able to end the influence of the fragmenting perceptions of the outside world through death. However, it seems that death is irrelevant to both Sula's consciousness and her voice, and it appears she has truly found, albeit in her own space and time, the participatory acceptance afforded through the power of a genuinely absent body. And while Nel's epiphany is full of "sorrow" and "loss", it too is formless. Her false core scatters, her cry is permanent in its endless echoes of "circles and circles," and yet it has no "bottom and no top", no boundaries, and nothing to inhibit it. As Fulton claims, Nel's "circles and circles of sorrow", like Sula's presence after death, have found a way to "outwit time" (75). Nel is still alive, she is unconfined, and with the twitching of an eye, she has

acknowledged Sula as the “always”, as the permanent watcher from her daydreams who offers a perpetual companionship that even in loss, affords a “certain kind of peace” (*Dancing Minds* 7).

The Battles of Love

Much like Sula and Nel, Christine and Heed do not achieve epiphanies until Heed dies, and throughout childhood, they too are faced with a multitude of fragmenting perceptions and pain that threaten to permanently separate them. Vida notes that at the hotel there were “mysterious battles [and] pathetic victories. Mr. Cosey was royal; L [...] priestly. All the rest [...] were court personnel fighting for the prince’s smile” (37). The “battle” for Mr. Cosey’s attention filters down to and encompasses the girls, and before they are even fully aware of what is happening to them, they too get swept up into and become a part of the “war.” Various people or objects begin to act as intermediaries between them, impeding, aiding, or generally interfering with their relationship, and May, Mr. Cosey, Junior, and even the girls’ surroundings become conduits or dividers between them. All of the interferences cause the girls to become preoccupied with their bodies and outside perceptions, and their friendship soon becomes fragmented. At the beginning of the novel, L claims, “*Sometimes the cut is so deep no woe-is-me tale is enough. Then the only thing that does the trick, that explains the craziness heaping up, holding down, and making women hate one another [...] is an outside evil*” (5). L maintains that the outside evil to which she refers involves “Police-heads.” According to L, Police-heads were once frequent haunts of Sooker Beach, dallying in the ocean, drowning misbehaving children and adulterous adults, and acting as moralistic nautical vigilantes. L also claims, however, that after the demise of the

hotel, the Police-heads are rarely seen, and her concept of “outside evil” remains mysterious. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Christine and Heed are surrounded by various “outside evils” that blur the lines between love, hate, pain, and healing.

One day, as the girls play separately on the beach with imaginary friends, they meet one another, temporarily dispel their loneliness, and find mutual acceptance and camaraderie through ice cream shared with a coffee spoon. This instance of friendship and food-sharing is analyzed more closely in chapter two. The encounter on the beach, however, is quickly interrupted by May, who tells Heed, ““Go away now. This is private.”” Heed then hears Christine calling, ““Wait! Wait!”” (78). Heed reflects on the incident when she is older and “studie[s] her face in the mirror. ‘Go away?’ She ask[s] her reflection. ‘Wait?’ How could she do both? [...] But in time the one who shouted ‘Wait!’ was gone and the one who said ‘Go away’ was shunned” (78). Heed receives conflicting instructions, she is both welcomed and rejected, and ultimately, despite all of the interference, she is left isolated and alone after May is “shunned” and Christine “is gone.” Perceptions of camaraderie and acceptance are accompanied by instances of rejection and misunderstanding, and throughout the women’s lives, the flux between acceptance and rejection remains, and the beach scene indicates a pattern continuously repeated. In her dedication to Mr. Cosey and in her increasingly crazed attempts to protect the hotel from “outsiders”, which include whites, communists, and those of a different class, May begins to view her own daughter as a potential threat, ally or enemy, but she “became clarity at its most extreme [...] when she did everything to separate the two when they were little girls” (99). May’s interference is further noted by L:

[May] had put up with the girls' friendship until Mr. Cosey messed with it. Then she had to figure something out fast. If Heed and Christine had ideas about being friends and behaving like sisters just because a reckless old reprobate had a whim, May put a stop to them. If she couldn't stop the bottlefly, she could tear its wings, Raid-spray the air so it couldn't breathe – or turn her daughter into an ally. Pity. They were just little girls. (136)

Despite May's initial instructions for Heed to "Go away", she temporarily pretends to tolerate the girls' friendship; however, when Mr. Cosey decides to marry the eleven-year-old Heed, May's disgust and worry are exacted on the girls, she begins to treat their friendship as a battleground, and throws a "hatchet" between them "that stuck" and "cleaved the ground they stood on" (141). May's first verbal interruption of Christine and Heed's friendship on the beach then progresses into an attempt to enforce a physical separation, and she begins to move Christine from one part of the hotel to another. Christine is told "she would have to leave her bedroom and sleep in a smaller room on another floor" because "there were things she shouldn't see or hear or know about" (95). Christine is so upset about having to give up, "for her own protection", her bedroom with "forget-me-nots dotted on the wallpaper" (95) that she runs away. Hours later, she is brought home by a police officer before being slapped by her mother. Disgusted with Mr. Cosey's unnamed nocturnal actions, May addresses the issue by restricting Christine. Leaving sights and sounds unexplained, she further isolates her daughter by allowing her to move back into her bedroom and then locking her in at night (96). Like the beach incident, the bedroom becomes a site of confusing controversy throughout the novel, where space is dictated and perceptions are obscured, and Christine remains a prisoner of war in a battle of which she is ignorant. Slapped and shifted from one

location to another, Christine's body becomes a nuisance and something to hide, to protect, or to lock away.

After the incident with May, Christine and Heed decide to have a picnic. Realizing they "have forgotten the jacks" (190), Heed goes back to the hotel to Christine's room to retrieve them. "Wiggling" her hips to music coming from the bar, Heed encounters Mr. Cosey in the hallway. After a brief exchange, "he touches her chin, and then – casually, still smiling – her nipple, or rather the place under her swimsuit where a nipple will be if the circled dot on her chest ever changes" (191). Heed cannot enter the bedroom and begins to run back down the hallway only to encounter May, who proceeds to chastise her for running while simultaneously claiming "how happy they all are that she and Christine are friends and what that friendship can teach her" (191). Before Heed can tell Christine what has happened, she is not only interrupted by May, but she also notices that Christine has vomited on her swimsuit. Christine has vomited, however, not because she has witnessed Mr. Cosey's interaction with Heed, but because she notices him, immediately after the incident, "standing there, in her bedroom window, his trousers open, his wrist moving" (192). Both girls then become "ashamed" (192) of Mr. Cosey and of themselves. Each blames herself for his actions, but each also assumes that the other is judging her. Heed then feels the need to lie about the jacks, and neither of them can find a language in which to talk about either of the incidents (192). Scarry claims that "the voice becomes a final source of self-extension; so long as one is speaking, the self extends out beyond the boundaries of body, occupies a space much larger than the body" (33). Scarry maintains that voice is more powerful than the body and that it defies boundaries. From a young age, however,

Christine's and Heed's voices are restricted, power is allocated to May, Mr. Cosey, and L, and the girls begin to become preoccupied with their bodies, which in turn increasingly become the only spaces afforded them. The friendship of acceptance begun on the beach, where color, class, and education do not matter, all of a sudden becomes physical and confusing through the touching of Heed, the vomit, and the masturbation. The incidents with Mr. Cosey occurring in Christine's bedroom result in a new bodily awareness for both girls, and their inability to reconcile their recent experiences with themselves or each other results in fragmentation, distance, and misunderstanding.

By the time Christine goes "to bed that night, [her grandfather's] shadow had booked the room. She didn't have to glance at the window or see the curtains yield before a breeze to know that an old man's solitary pleasure lurked there" (192). Even in life Mr. Cosey has become a shadow, pervading the spaces around him, and the bedroom Christine formerly cherished and fought for has become infiltrated by his presence and a site for both familiarity and nightmare. Homi Bhabha states, "The intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for [...the] most intricate invasions. In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (141). Bhabha notes the discomfort that ensues when the external world encroaches upon the private sphere. For Christine, the familiarity of her room becomes foreign, first when May temporarily removes her from it, and finally when Mr. Cosey commandeers it for his own pleasure. Mr. Cosey's bodily intrusion into her private sphere is "like a guest with a long held reservation arriving in your room at last, a guest you knew would stay" (192). "Guest" implies that perhaps he has been

invited, and it reflects the blame Christine places on herself for his actions; however, “stay” contradicts the very notion of a guest and indicates a permanence in his shadowy presence. “Shadow” further involves something unnamed and not quite clearly viewed, hovering at the edges of perception and solidity. Mr. Cosey’s bodily behavior does not immediately physically separate the girls but instead results in “the birth of sin” where even their secret language “Igaday can’t help them” to articulate what they have witnessed and felt (192). The beach scene and the actions involving Christine’s bedroom, May, and Mr. Cosey culminate in sensations that cannot be processed or communicated, and despite each other’s presence, the girls become isolated by their shame. Having no space of their own and no way to voice their pain, the girls gradually retreat further into their bodies, which have also been invaded by Mr. Cosey and dictated to by May. Judgment is then misinterpreted and misplaced and rather than trying to find companionship in one another, the girls instead attempt to find acceptance through the one man who causes the most fragmentation.

The mental and lingual separations that occur between Christine and Heed are then perpetuated into a physical separation when Heed leaves for her honeymoon with Mr. Cosey:

Christine gazes into the darkness huddling the porch steps where a sunlit child is rigid with fear and the grief of abandonment. Yet her hand raised in farewell is limp. Only the bow in her hair is more languid than that hand. Beyond her gaze is another child, staring through the window of an automobile, idling, purring like a cat. The driver is the grandfather of one, the husband of the other. The passenger’s face is a blend of wild eyes, grin, and confusion. The limp hand waves while the other one’s fingers press the car window. Will it break? Will her fingers crack the glass, cutting the skin and spilling blood down the side of the door? They might, because she is pressing so hard. Her eyes are large, but she is grinning too. Does she want to go? Is she afraid to go? Neither one

understands. Why can't she go too? Why is he taking one to a honeymoon and leaving the other? They will come back, won't they? But when? She looks so alone in that big car, but she is smiling – or trying to. There ought to be blood. There must be blood somewhere, because the sunlit child on the porch is holding herself stiff against the possibility. Only her farewell hand is soft, limp. Like the bow in her hair. (170)

Later in life, Christine reflects on the abandonment, pain, and grief of the incident, views it as the loss of Heed, and relates the sensations as being equivalent to the death of her father. The separation between the girls as Heed departs for her honeymoon is palpable and all-encompassing. Confusion is reflected in the multitude of unvoiced questions racing through Christine's mind as well as the conflicting sight of Heed's wide eyes and attempted grin. Separation, though, is not only mental, and the girls are divided by both the glass window and by their distinctive bodily reactions. Both girls are restricted and confined, and the incident emphasizes the uselessness yet dominating importance of the girls' bodies. Christine's rigidity is self-contained as she sits helplessly on the steps watching her friend being taken from her, whereas Heed is literally, rather than figuratively trapped, and her behavior in the car seems to present the contrasting images of a kidnapping alongside a holiday departure. The girls are trapped and unable to touch or hear one another, they cannot interpret their own or the other's body, and the incident itself is the result of Mr. Cosey's interest in Heed's body. Ultimately, the scene ends with unexpressed feelings of "Sorrow" and of repressed urges for violence in images of blood and shattered glass.

The pain, fragmentation, and forced separation inherent in the honeymoon departure are reproduced throughout the novel, and the same sensations later manifest

themselves in physical fights between Christine and Heed. The women have adopted the battleground attitude of May and perpetuated it in her absence:

Once – perhaps twice – a year, they punched, grabbed hair, wrestled, bit, slapped. Never drawing blood, never apologizing, never premeditating, yet drawn annually to pant through an episode that was as much rite as fight. Finally they stopped, moved into acrid silence, and invented other ways to underscore bitterness. Along with age, recognition that neither one could leave played a part in their unnegotiated cease-fire. More on the mark was their unspoken realization that the fights did nothing other than allow them to hold each other. (73-74)

The fights are a violent fulfillment of the closeness the girls could not achieve as Heed is whisked away on her honeymoon, and the aggression is an outlet for the sensations that could not previously be expressed. Hatred and love become blurred during Christine and Heed's fights, and the physicality of their battles provides an excuse to be in one another's company. While the fights do provide a reason for interaction, they are still rife with misunderstanding, and the violence only serves to add more pain, confusion, and fragmentation. The silence, too, that eventually replaces the fights is a reminder of the inability of language to describe their childhood encounters with Mr. Cosey, and even in adulthood, the women still cannot find the words to voice the experiences that have haunted them. As a witness to their violence, Junior notes that "the glittery, pear-shaped lamps on the end tables were both cracked. Two panels of striped drapes sagged from their rods; others were ripped. Battle signs, she thought. Before they got too old or tired to do it anymore or settled for unmaskable silence" (156). The shattered lamps are a fulfillment of Christine's desire for "cracked glass" (170) that pervades the honeymoon departure scene, and the image also becomes a symbol of recurring pain throughout the novel as even Sandler notes that Mr. Cosey's eyes "radiated pain like

cracked glass” (42). By breaking glass and attacking one another, the women are again able to achieve the physical closeness and express the emotions they were denied as children.

Eventually, the animosity between the women has become so intense that “their faces, as different as honey from soot, look [...] identical. Hate does that. Burns off everything but itself, so whatever your grievance is, your face looks just like your enemy’s” (34). Hatred, violence, and misunderstanding commandeer the women’s bodies until they even begin to resemble one another, and their similar appearances allow a pseudo-connection between them, offering a physical sameness in a parody of the mental and emotional acceptance they temporarily achieved as children. Despite their mutual “hatred” of one another, however, the women are equally aware of each other’s presence, absence, or movement, and for as much as they claim to be consumed by Mr. Cosey and his disputed will, the women are equally as consumed by the remnants of their friendship. Morris maintains:

Pain [...] tends to open an almost impassable gulf between individuals, implicitly discrediting our usual pieties about brotherhood and the human community. [...] Pain, in this sense, *is* the Other: utterly alien, even when it invades our own flesh. As Sade would contend, it both creates and symbolizes isolation. Words of knowledge carry poorly across this abyss. (238)

A variety of pain has inserted itself into Christine and Heed’s relationship. The incident with the car has caused them to view one another as foreign “Other”, and they can no more articulate their pain than they can “plan” their fights. After living such extended periods of time with unhealed wounds, which are originally perpetuated by the outside world, the women are beyond healing themselves and can only attempt to fill the

“impassable gulf” between them with more pain. Additionally, Christine begins to believe her struggles with Heed are “important” and “neither mindless nor wasted” (132), and she mentally recriminates Heed for trading their friendship for “a dark room at the end of the hall reeking of old man’s business, doing things no one would describe but were so terrible no one could ignore them” (132). Just as Heed believes she is acted upon and then isolated by May and Christine, Christine believes that Heed has abandoned her in favor of Mr. Cosey. Misunderstandings and forced isolation result in successfully dividing Christine and Heed even after the perpetrators of the separation have died, and the women have begun to “*battle on as though they were champions instead of sacrifices*” (141).

By the end of the novel, both women live together in the house on Monarch Street. The house has by then been the site of so many battles between them that Heed describes it as her personal “Vietnam” (129) and Christine likens her own experiences to “slavery” (94). Although May and Mr. Cosey are both dead and the hotel containing Christine’s former bedroom is derelict, the women soon create other connections between them to ensure both separation and a tenuous link. As Junior wanders through the house after first meeting Christine in the kitchen upstairs to an interview with Heed she notes:

Like the kitchen below, this room was over bright, like a department store. Every lamp – six? ten? – was on, rivaling the chandelier. Mounting the unlit stairs, glancing over her shoulder, Junior had to guess what the other rooms might hold. It seemed to her that each woman lived separated – or connected – by the darkness between them. Staring openly at the items crowding the surfaces of the tables, she waited for the little woman to break the silence. (25)

Too old to physically fight and unwilling or unable to speak, “rivalry” is now illustrated by trying to outdo one another with lamplight, and the darkened hallway serves as both conduit and divider. For Christine and Heed, the majority of the house on Monarch Street is irrelevant and shrouded in darkness, the only rooms that interest each are those the other inhabits, and the silence that began with the touching of Heed in Christine’s former bedroom has now infiltrated the spaces the women occupy in the house. As Junior walks along the corridor and into an illuminated silence, she too becomes another excuse for the women to interact with or ignore one another. After Junior is hired, she contemplates her new role in the household and realizes, “Neither woman was interested in her – except as it simplified or complicated their relationship with each other. Not quite a go-between, not quite a confidante, it was a murky role [...]” (119). Heed and Christine are so accustomed to the interference of others in their relationship that they automatically assign Junior to the roles formerly occupied by May and Mr. Cosey. Previously bereft of any company besides each other’s, Heed and Christine replace the dark corridor which links them with the “murky” role of Junior, and their lack of speech and physical interactions are now conducted through her.

By the end of the novel, Heed and Christine are able to rid themselves of a multitude of barriers. Determined to rewrite Mr. Cosey’s will, Heed takes Junior to the hotel where she hopes to find menus on which to forge it, and once Christine discovers their intentions, she follows them. When Christine finds the women, she and Heed, who still cannot speak, simply look at one another, “opening pangs of guilt, rage, fatigue [and] despair” only to replace those sensations with “a hatred so pure, so solemn, it feels beautiful, almost holy” (177). Once again, lines between love and hate become blurred,

and repressed sensations fill the gaps of silence. Within moments, however, Junior interrupts their gaze, and places a carpet in Heed's way, tripping her and causing her to fall down the stairs. As Christine watches the fall, hatred becomes "a feeling of abandonment [that] loosens a loneliness so intolerable that Christine drops to her knees peering down at the darkness below" (177). Repressed loneliness, which had been replaced by violence, hatred, and a preoccupation with Mr. Cosey, begins to be released and realized. The isolation enforced by the honeymoon departure scene is then completely dissolved as Christine "races" to where Heed has fallen and "gathers her in her arms", causing the "holy feeling" to be altered and "overwhelmed by desire" (177). Even the bodily functions that they disallowed themselves while Heed was trapped in the car now have an outlet: Heed is "cracked to pieces", Christine is "sweating like a laundress", and they are holding each other (184).

As Junior runs away and as the light from the attic goes out, the women are left in each other's company where barriers gradually continue to retreat. As Heed lies on the ground, she notices that they are in Christine's old bedroom where "an obstinate skeleton stirs, clacks, refreshes itself" (177). While Heed and Christine may have temporarily rid themselves of Junior, the influences of May, Mr. Cosey, and their surroundings still linger. Heed contemplates the room:

The forget-me-nots roaming the wallpaper are more vivid in this deliberate dark than they ever were in daylight and she wonders what it was that made her want it so. Home, she thinks. When I stepped in the door, I thought I was home. (183)

Entangled in the room where Christine and Heed used to share laughter and stories (132) are memories of violation and abandonment as well as feelings of being "home."

Memories and contradictory sensations are then expressed through the discovery of jacks laying alongside a yellow bathing suit in a nearby drawer (185). The items are a reminder of childhood innocence that ends when a grown man's touch becomes vomit on a little girl's bathing suit. The bedroom then, as illustrated through the women's thoughts and the objects they rediscover, is mired in feelings of confusion, invasion, and truncated childhoods. Scarry reflects on the concept of a room and views it as

an enlargement of the body: it keeps warm and safe the individual it houses in the same way the body encloses and protects the individual within; like the body, its walls put boundaries around the self preventing undifferentiated contact with the world, yet in its windows and doors, crude versions of the senses, it enables the self to move out into the world and allows that world to enter. (38)

Scarry maintains that rooms, just as bodies, are personal sites capable of protecting the self and yet offering interaction with an external world. For Christine and Heed, however, boundaries of both body and room have been violated by Mr. Cosey whose presence is palpable long after his own body has become absent. And the women must now seek to extricate their notion of "home" and safety from the lingering presence of a skeleton.

Prompted by the absence of Junior and light as well as by the rediscovered jacks and swimsuit, Heed and Christine temporarily ignore their physically fractured bodies and begin to speak in a language that is "sudden, raw, stripped to its underwear" (184). The ensuing discussion is straightforward and uninhibited even by quotation marks, and here, in this final scene, all of the images of the novel find unity. They begin their conversation with May, the first to put a barrier between them. Eventually, the conversation becomes a discussion of Celestial and finally L, and the women intersperse

their talk with a game of jacks. After clarifying some of the inhibiting roles people played in both their lives, Christine uses her old bathing suit to “wipe the perspiration from her face and neck” before “toss[ing] it on the floor” (186). The bathing suit, symbolic of violation, is discarded, and the jacks, representative of a game never played and of lost innocence, are now reemployed. Finally, Heed admits that Mr. Cosey “took all [her] childhood away” from her, and Christine acknowledges he took “all of [Heed] away from [Christine]” (194). By the end of the novel, Heed is also able to voice the word for which she had “listened for twenty-four years” (30) and tells Christine, “Love. I really do” (194). In “Blues, Love, and Politics” Morrison claims:

It was important that the word “love” be withdrawn from the text. I went over and over it to make sure that that word was never used except by somebody who had earned it. That was not limitless love, that was not unconditional love, this was something that had to do with work and thinking it through [...], and it’s only after they have a real conversation can they use the word “love.” (20)

By the end of the novel, the proclamation of “love” is almost a relief. After the novel’s title, the word’s absence throughout the text becomes as disturbing as Mr. Cosey’s and L’s absent bodies. The women are also able to reconcile the multitude of images of abused or abusive hands in the novel by first claiming, “We could have been living our lives hand in hand instead of looking for Big Daddy everywhere” (189) and again when Heed finally asks, “Hold my...hold my hand” (194). For Heed and Christine, whose bodies are now literally racked with pain, “the future is disintegrating along with the past” (184); however, as they purge memories and language, they finally manage to live in the present moment where Mr. Cosey truly begins to become absent. Heed and Christine achieve epiphany together where a variety of pain is acknowledged and

dispersed through death, where language and speech are restored, and where the
“*separation that cuts to the bone*” (200) is replaced by “*a child’s first chosen love*”
(199).

Transition One

Pain has been shown, in *Sula* and *Love*, to alter perception, to take on its own form, and to create forms, penetrating societies, infiltrating individuals, and by its very nature, causing isolation and fragmentation. In order to become whole individuals, characters must try to dissolve the forms of pain and attempt to create a reciprocal bond with the world outside of it. However, pain has also been shown to be a difficult concept and form of which to rid oneself and one's community, and in *Sula* and *Love*, it seems that the isolation and fragmentation of pain only end when its major vehicle, the body, becomes irrelevant in death. After death, which seemingly does not affect the sententiousness of characters such as Heed and Sula, bodily pain is dissolved and the protagonists regain a posthumous acceptance through friendship. If pain is for Scarry, "the single broad and omni-present fact of existence" (55), it seems that through death, Morrison has allocated an indefinable, unformed space outside of pain where her characters manage to be individuals as well as to have a meaningful, nonjudgmental relationship with another outside the constricting confines of pain.

What pain is to Scarry, however, food is to Maud Ellmann, and she claims, "It is impossible to share another person's hunger, just as it is impossible to share another person's pain, and both sensations demonstrate the savage loneliness of bodily experience" (6). Ellmann likens food to pain and notes its immediately isolating nature. It too can be fragmentary, and in the solitariness of the sensations that surround it, it can separate the individual from her society. However, Ellmann also claims that "Food is the symbol of the passage, the totem of sociality, the epitome of all creative and destructive labor. Food is the prototype of all exchanges with the other, be they verbal,

financial, or erotic. [...] Food is the thesaurus of all moods and all sensations” (112).

Unlike pain, food can be redemptive. For as isolating as the experiences of eating or hunger can be, food is also deeply “social” and can create bonds between people. Such bonds, however, have the power both to “create” and to “destroy” and food can be used as manipulation. Food involves all of the senses and becomes a part of each aspect of life, and for Ellmann, as much as food has the potential to destroy or to isolate, it equally has the power to heal and to unify.

In the following chapter, Morrison’s *Paradise* uses food much like *Sula* and *Love* use pain. Eating disorders and the inability to nourish are passed from the community to the individual and at times cause fragmentation and isolation and even exacerbate pain. However, by learning how to nourish themselves, the Convent women in *Paradise* are able to dissolve the pain that haunts them while simultaneously creating a harmony between their bodies, minds, and souls as well as forming reciprocal relationships with others. The epiphanies that are achieved in *Paradise*, however, involve more than just acceptance. They are communal as well as individual and the food, eating habits, and nurturance that inspire them eventually involve salvation. In the words of the ultimate gourmand M.F.K. Fisher, in *Paradise*, “There is a communion of more than [...] bodies when bread is broken and wine drunk” (353).

The Salvation of Food

“The destiny of nations depends upon the manner in which they feed themselves.”

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

The Physiology of Taste: Or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy 15

For the Love of Food: An Introduction

I meant to ask you. How did she die?
How you think? Cooking.
Frying chicken?
Uh-uh. Smothering pork chops.
Where?
Maceo's. Dropped dead at the stove. (189)

The conversation Christine and Heed have about L in *Love* captures the notion that food can be dangerous and complicated in Morrison's novels. The words of Bill Buford, author of an introduction to Brillat-Savarin's *Physiology of Taste*, remain true for all of Morrison's work that “Everywhere [there is] the same message: food is more than itself. It is not everything, but it is touched by almost everything: memory, weather, dirt, hunger, chemistry, the universe” (xii). In many of Morrison's novels, food is frequently and initially associated with rejection, death, nausea, and abuse before it is used to show love, unity, and salvation. As Terry Eagleton claims, “Like the post-structuralist text, food is endlessly interpretable, as gift, threat, poison, recompense, barter, seduction, solidarity, [and] suffocation” (204). For instance, in *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly's humiliation by the white men during his first sexual encounter is accompanied by a description of eating “muscadine grapes” (114) that turn into “rotten fetid bile”

(116) in his stomach. Abuse is then perpetuated as he rapes Pecola in the kitchen where his “guilt and impotence rose in a bilious dust” and where “hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit” (127). In *Sula*, Sula’s severed finger looks like a “button mushroom curling in cherry blood” (54), and Eva murders a son named Plum amidst “store bought cherry pie”, “balled up candy wrappers”, and a glass of blood masquerading as “strawberry crush” (46). In *Beloved*, Beloved’s voracious appetite enables astonishing physical growth while simultaneously emaciating Sethe. Sethe is also physically abused for her breast milk and has it stolen from her while her husband Halle’s madness takes place at a churn with “butter all over his face” (69). Similarly, in *Song of Solomon*, milk is not depicted as nourishing, but as detrimental, and the novel’s protagonist Milkman derives his name from “strange and wrong” (14) afternoons spent breastfeeding into adolescence. In *Tar Baby*, Valerian’s wife Margaret constantly counts calories and frequently forgets both how to use utensils and how to eat. Controversy also occurs because Son insists that “he has not followed the women” but has come “to get a drink of water, tarried to bite an avocado” (137), and chaos erupts in the island house when Valerian, the former owner of a candy conglomerate, invites Son to dinner.

Food is everywhere in Morrison’s novels. It is intertwined with plot and character development, it is presented, not only alongside events, but even as an event, and eating at times appears as ritual. Food is also portrayed as malnourishing, it has the tendency to become associated with pain and madness, and it frequently appears as an accomplice to segregation, fragmentation, isolation, and disintegration. It also serves as a conduit between bodies, generations, and communities. It is, in other words,

inseparable from Morrison's characters and their cultures, and through food, characters convey both pain and the potential to heal. Perhaps, however, out of all of Morrison's novels, *Paradise* is most strongly linked to food. Feasting, fasting, nausea, bingeing, purging, and cannibalism are all present in the novel as well as controversies over kitchens, gardens, and an Oven. Furthermore, as Counihan and Van Esterik maintain, "food links body and soul, self and other, the personal and the political, the material and the symbolic. Moreover, as food shifts from being local and known to being global and unknown it has been transformed into a potential symbol of fear and anxiety, as well as morality" (Second Edition, 2). In *Paradise*, food is not simply food, and eating practices and disorders are linked to cultural and moral concerns. In the novel, food is initially divisive and then unifying; it illustrates self-love and loathing, and it is further used to depict power struggles based on fears of others' values. It also inextricably links body and soul, external and internal, and community and other as characters strive to unite physical, mental, and spiritual nourishment. As the novel progresses, food is used to show characters' tendencies to either perpetuate or disseminate pain and hardship, and a character's handling and perception of food exemplifies her ability either to stagnate or to attain salvation.

Perhaps the most succinct example of the many uses of food in Morrison's novels is found in *Love*. L, the manipulative cook and narrator who is dead from the beginning of the novel and discussed in chapter one, is consistently associated with food. Burning Heed's hand, creating "caramelized evil" out of the fire in Christine's room, and fabricating Mr. Cosey's will on a menu all illustrate not only L's ability to manipulate, but also the fact that food permeates and is intertwined with most major

instances in the novel. The description of L's death further emphasizes a violence and a lack of nourishment associated with food. Not only does L "drop dead" but the chicken is "fried" and the pork chops are "smothered," and food gives a sinister impression. As the novel progresses, all of its characters begin to become associated, in some way, with negative descriptions of food. For instance, Romen vomits up "his grandmother's cooking in the grass" (49) after getting into a fight that occurs because of a gang rape that turns the smell of a room into "vegetables and rotten grapes and wet clay" (46). Christine also vomits before a picnic with Heed and is forced to "yank her hand away when her breakfast flow[s] into her palm" after witnessing her grandfather masturbate with "the same speed L use[s] to beat egg whites into unbelievable creaminess" (192). Christine's seventh abortion is depicted as disappearing down the toilet "in a cloud of raspberry red" (164), and Heed feels rejected by the older, richer women of the community while eating a salad (76).

Food has already been shown, then, in this novel to be associated with, or used as a descriptor for rape, abortion, nausea, masturbation, and rejection; however, along with hate and Mr. Cosey, food creates a connection between Heed and Christine, and it eventually becomes representative of love. When Junior first arrives at the house on Monarch Street, Christine is deveining shrimp. The encounter between them is punctuated by a silence "over the tick of shrimp shells" (21), and their interaction is intertwined with the "rhythm" (21) of Christine's food preparations as well as a description of Junior having "the unnerving look of an underfed child" (23). The seemingly mundane, almost background illustrations of Christine's preparations pave the way for the character development of Christine, Junior, and Heed, and the noises of

Christine's cooking "rhythm" accentuate memory, silence, and speech. There is also an air of magic or mystery surrounding the cooking, and Junior can only watch as Christine's "twelve rings, two on three fingers of each hand, snatch light from the ceiling and seem to elevate her task from drudgery to sorcery" (20). It is not just the interplay of light and jewels that seems bewitching, but also the fact that Junior leaves Christine deveining shrimp, only to see her delivering a "meticulously, artfully" (24) prepared casserole moments later. Already, food has appeared as conversation topic, as plot device, work, desire, sustenance, and as something mysterious. Between Christine and Heed, food also represents an animosity that the two women no longer verbalize. Christine takes "the silver tray [...] up three flights of stairs, where she hoped it [the casserole] would choke the meanest thing on the coast" (24). Heed is not immune to the attack, and as Junior exclaims, "'Mmmm, God, she sure knows how to cook,'" Heed responds, "'What she knows is, I don't eat shellfish'" (28). Christine and Heed no longer speak to one another, and their interactions are conducted not simply through Junior but through the rejection and acceptance of food. Silence and fasting at times become synonymous, and Ellmann claims that "food-refusal is a metaphor for word refusal" (24). Counihan and Van Esterik further note that "food sharing is the medium for creating and maintaining social relations both within and beyond the household. Because of the mandatory nature of food-sharing, food refusal and fasting have powerful social and symbolic weight. [...] Appetite can be a powerful voice" (3). Food becomes a conduit for emotion and a potential link between the body that prepares it and the body that eats or denies it. The bond, however, remains incomplete as Junior eats what Heed

refuses, and the exchange and rejection of food is used to show the intentional distance Christine and Heed put between each other.

On a more unifying note, the shrimp casserole also spurs Christine to remember the coffee spoon in her apron pocket:

It was tiny, a coffee spoon, but Christine ate every meal she could with it just to hold close the child it was given to, and hold also the pictures it summoned. Scooping peach slices with it from homemade ice cream, helpless in the thrill, never minding the grains of sand blowing over the dessert – the whole picnic lunch for that matter. (22)

The spoon and picnic, briefly mentioned in chapter one, are left partially unexplained until Heed has the same memory:

Once a little girl wandered too far – down to big water and along its edge where waves skidded and mud turned into clean sand. Ocean spray dampened the man's undershirt she wore. There on a red blanket another little girl with white ribbons in her hair sat eating ice cream. [...] "Hi, want some?" asked the girl, holding out a spoon.

They ate ice cream with peaches in it until a smiling woman came and said, "Go away now. This is private." (78)

The friendship between Heed and Christine, begun with shared ice cream and the spoon that fed both of them in a moment of acceptance, remains a link between them throughout their lives, and Christine carries the silver spoon with her from Monarch Street to Dr. Rio's and back again (85). The repetition of the incident also highlights the fact that Christine and Heed, despite their displays of animosity, consistently try to recreate that moment of all-encompassing friendship on the beach. The emphasis on the beach scene reflects Susanne Shubal's comment that "much of human hunger is memory" (5). The memory both women share is one where loneliness and the disparity of wealth, education, and upbringing are rendered meaningless in a moment of acceptance enabled by and illustrated through food. Christine's and Heed's childhoods

are punctuated by moments where food is both unifying and divisive. Throughout their lives, it has been used as a weapon or as a means of friendship, and depending upon the circumstances, food has, for both women, become a representation of affection and animosity, of love and hate. In a perpetuation of their first meeting, the scene of sharing ice cream and a spoon is mentioned again by L at the end of the novel:

I see you. You and your invisible friend, inseparable on the beach. You both are sitting on a red blanket eating ice cream, say, with a silver spoon, say, when a real girl appears sloshing the wavelets. I can see you, too, walking the shore in a man's undershirt instead of a dress, listening to the friend nobody sees but you. Intent on words only you can hear when a real voice says Hi, want some? Unnecessary now, the secret friends disappear in favor of flesh and bone. (199)

In terms of food L's words reiterate its power not only to manipulate, but to heal, to fill empty spaces with "flesh and bone" rather than with invisible friends, and to bridge relationships between people. By the end of the novel, the beach scene and the sharing of food emphasize a redemptive instance of love, friendship, and acceptance. As well as L's musings, the end of the novel also depicts Christine trying to help the injured Heed by feeding her "a can of Dole pineapple and some packets of Stanback powder" (184). Between the women, food is no longer used as a weapon but as an attempt to heal. Food is also no longer rejected or denied, and there is trust and love between the one giving and the one receiving. In brief, the use of food in *Love* is similar to the use of food in many of Morrison's novels, specifically *Paradise*. Food permeates events, and it even becomes an event; it is used as manipulation, as conduit, as descriptor, and finally, it is used to heal, to unify, and to save.

Foundations of Food and Hatred: Journeys Toward Haven and Ruby

Paradise, more intricately than *Love*, uses food to detail character and plot development and to illustrate a progression from fragmentation, isolation, and discord, to acceptance, community, and epiphany. Food and the way it is eaten, cooked, grown, provided, and perceived is inherent in all of the novel's themes. *Paradise* is the story, in brief, of an all-black town named Ruby. Its inhabitants struggle to live in the present while still maintaining the values of their ancestors, which is described more intricately in chapter three. Before Ruby is founded, the town's ancestors set out to find a place in the world. Rejected by an all-black community due to the especially dark hues of their skin, the "Founding Fathers" decide to create their own town, called Haven, where they can feed, clothe, and educate their children in a place free from racial prejudices. However, as Jeannette King observes, "In trying to create a safe haven beyond the reach of white racism, they create a world which ironically becomes its mirror image, dependent on the same kind of binary oppositions that underpin white supremacist thinking" (155-156). Moving farther from their ideals, the Founders inadvertently spawn an elitist, racist, and sexist community. While the Founders' offspring eventually move away from Haven and create Ruby, the tensions and hypocrisies begun by their forefathers remain with them. As the stories of Haven and Ruby are told, they are intertwined with the narratives of the women who live in an old convent on the outskirts of town. One by one, the women arrive at the Convent with individual stories of pain. The men of Ruby, however, begin to feel so threatened by the values and practices of the Convent women that they attack them, and the novel begins and ends with female deaths. While depicting Ruby's and the Convent's struggles, *Paradise* encompasses

issues of religion, race, and sex. What is largely overlooked, as noted in the introduction, is the novel's use of food to convey its themes. More than anything else, *Paradise* is a story of nourishment, perpetuation, and a flux between unity and division. Characters strive either to perpetuate life, race, or wealth, and the ways in which they physically nourish themselves has a direct influence on their efforts. Counihan and Van Esterik claim that "Food touches everything. [...] Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds, and contradictions. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family, and community relationships" (1). The novel's themes and relationships, including boundaried concepts of inside and outside and self and other, are all realized through depictions of food and eating, and characters must find a way to nourish themselves physically and mentally before being able to attain a spiritual salvation.

From the beginning of the Founders' journey, emphasis is placed on food and survival, and questions arise as to what nourishes and what creates community. For instance the "Disallowing", which is the story of the Founders' rejection from the town comprised of "fair-skinned colored men" (195), centers not only around skin color, but around food. The men who deny the Founders residency offer instead food, blankets, and money, all of which the Founding Fathers in turn reject and "forbid the women to eat" or to accept (195). The women, on the other hand, "sneak back" for the food "to distribute to the children" (195), and a clandestine division occurs between the sexes. Amongst the children is also baby Lone, who is discovered outside of a shack with her dead mother. The men initially seem "adamant about not adding a half-starved baby to their own quarter-starved ones" (190), even though prior to the Disallowing, they freely

accepted anyone who wanted to join them (189). The women, though, insist on adopting and feeding her. Despite her early beginnings with the future inhabitants of Haven, Lone remains an outsider throughout *Paradise*, and her spirituality and her skills as a midwife are eventually viewed suspiciously. Multiple problems arise from the Disallowing, and the situation becomes much more than a matter of race or even of eating. Kilgour maintains that “the most basic model for all forms of incorporation is the physical act of eating, and food is the most important symbol for external substances that are absorbed” (*Communion* 6). In other words, as many other authors maintain, including Peckham, Savarin, Shubal, and Ward, eating is an act of “assimilation.” Through eating, one incorporates the outside with the inside, the self with the other, the external with the internal. By rejecting food, as well as baby Lone, the Founding Fathers are also refusing to “assimilate” or to become part of the town that rejects them. The women, on the other hand, not only nourish by accepting the food, but they create an unwanted connection to the external world. The controversy surrounding the “gift” of food, then, followed by the addition and feeding of Lone, create oppositions or fragmentation between men, women, communities, and lifestyles. Quoting Montaigne, Kilgour further states:

Body politics, where coherence and unity can be asserted through the analogy with the body corporeal, tend to view what exists beyond themselves as evil, for the “most mortal of sins is to be an outsider”, to be different, separate, and unassimilated by a system which maintains that “nothing at all may remain outside, because the mere idea of outsideness is the very source of fear” (*Communion* 4).

Kilgour’s statement implies that not only do the Founders show an aversion to the external, but that they view the external as “evil”, and they consistently display both fear

of the other and desire for isolation. The food situation creates yet another dilemma, and Parker maintains that “the sharing of food is central to Morrison’s vision of community” (638). In this instance, the Founders have no food to share amongst themselves, they frequently survive on “trash” (96), the women accept food from an external source, and it seems as though the community is disintegrating before it has even formed. Throughout *Paradise*, these initial instances of food rejection and food sharing result not simply in the development of different concepts of how to provide, sustain, and accept nourishment, but it also results in the development of different notions of community and morality. And what is implicit in these concepts is not only a flux between rejection, fragmentation and unity but also the underlying basis of *Paradise*: how best to perpetuate life.

For the Founding Fathers, especially Coffee Morgan, otherwise known as Big Papa or Zechariah, it is the perpetuation, nourishment, and containment of bloodlines, examined in greater detail in the following chapter, that becomes all-important, and which simultaneously involves a rejection of the other, or the outsider:

The scattering that alarmed Zechariah because he believed it would deplete them was now an even more dangerous level of evil, for if they broke apart and were disvalued by the impure, then, certain as death, those ten generations would disturb their children’s peace throughout eternity. (194)

The focus on ancestry and racial purity begins even before Ruby is founded; however, the catalysts behind Big Papa’s beliefs are fears of fragmentation and rejection and desires for an isolated, elitist unity. What begins as “white against black”, “free against slave”, or “rich against poor” eventually becomes, to the surprise of the Founding Fathers, “light-skinned against black” (194). The “division [the Founding Fathers]

sought to close”, becomes intertwined with skin color, and rather than integrate with the nation that rejects them, the Founders decide to separate and maintain an isolated unity amongst themselves. For the Founders, survival becomes about maintaining and perpetuating isolated ideals. Physical nourishment, as seen through the rejection of the donated food, comes secondary, not simply to ideals of pride or independence, but to the determination to honor their forefathers, and the refusal on the part of the men to feed and adopt Lone is also an early example of the desire to maintain the “purity” of their bloodlines. Both instances also indicate a division between the sexes that ultimately becomes a division between different ways of how to perpetuate life. While the women’s actions illustrate a willingness to nourish, to promote any life, and to extend beyond the boundaries of the familiar, the men increasingly show an unwillingness to interact with the external world, which even involves the act of eating.

Sidney Mintz discusses food values in terms of slavery and freedom:

Dealing in food was dealing in freedom at many levels. For example, working in the production of food legitimized certain claims that the slaves would level against their masters; working in the distribution of food legitimized freedom of movement, commercial maneuver, association and accumulation; working in the processing of food legitimized the perfection of skills that would become dependent upon its cooks, and because the cooks actually invented a cuisine that the masters could vaunt, but not duplicate themselves. (*Tasting* 47)

Mintz equates food with various types of freedom and knowledge, and he notes that through the handling, production, growth, and cooking of food, slaves were able to achieve certain levels of autonomy. By engaging in food-sharing activities and in the act of nourishment, the Founding women have obtained a certain measure of power, control, and knowledge beyond the men. By refusing to participate in such food activities, the

men are setting boundaries to their freedom and defining the terms of their isolation.

Where, what, and how to eat becomes a fragmented act based on rejection, and as Parker claims, “racial discrimination and inequality are indexed by who eats what” (615).

Beginning with the Founders and in contrast to the women, literal nourishment and the desire to perpetuate life gradually start to become usurped by desires to perpetuate the past and to maintain racial purity even, seemingly, at the cost of life.

The moral and gastronomical declines of both Haven and Ruby are further illustrated through the school’s annual Christmas play. The play, which substitutes the Founding Families of Haven for the Holy Family, exemplifies a loss of value, a narrower vision of community, and an inability to move beyond the past as well as a flux between fragmentation and unity. Adapting the Nativity story to include Haven’s history, the Christmas play is a jumble of legend and religion. It intertwines the rejection of Mary and Joseph from the inn with the Disallowing of the Founding Fathers. As the years progress, though, the play gradually reduces the number of Founding/ Holy families represented. One of the school’s teachers, Pat Best, maintains that some families are left out of the play because their skin is no longer dark enough. As well as illustrating the towns’ racist and elitist tendencies, however, the play also highlights Ruby’s eating “disorders”:

Bobbing and bowing, the masked ones reach under the table and lift up big floppy cardboard squares pasted with pictures of food. “Here. Take this and get on out of here.” Throwing the food pictures on the floor, they laugh and jump about. The holy families rear back as though snakes were being tossed at them. Pointing forefingers and waving fists, they chant: “God will crumble you. God will crumble you.” The audience hums agreement: “Yes He will. Yes He will.” (211)

The Christmas play encapsulates, with its inedible squares of semi-rejected food, a community of men who value violence, pride, race, and isolationism over sustenance, nurturance, and unity. Food is wasted, race is revered, and pride takes precedence, all of which in turn causes Haven to fail, Ruby to fail, and each new generation in both the play and the town to get smaller and smaller. The Christmas play, as well as the Disallowing and the treatment of Lone, reflects a journey towards a spiritual, moral, and literal starvation. Food, then, becomes inextricably related to the towns' muddled histories, to their lost values and hypocrisy, and to the need to find a substantial, rather than a fabricated unity.

In his article, "Furrowing All the Brows", Philip Page uses the twins Deacon and Steward Morgan, two of Big Papa's grandchildren, to illustrate a relationship between unity and fragmentation in Ruby:

The near-oneness of Deacon and Steward, like the tight harmony of the town, had once been useful but has become too binding. Deacon's need to grow on his own beyond his bond with Steward symbolizes the town's need to grow beyond its confining bond with its own legend. [...] Like the town, Deacon moves from a restrictive fusion to a liberating fragmentation. (645)

Page maintains that the "unity" of Ruby, just like the "unity" between Deacon and Steward is "too tight [and] only precipitates the dissolution it is designed to prevent" (644); however, rather than being "too tight," an argument can be made that Haven and Ruby were never truly unified communities. Kilgour claims, "The attempt to eliminate any remaining external remnant, to turn [...] the outside inside, suggests that the basis of dualism is a nostalgia for total unity and oneness" (*Communion* 5). Rather than displaying a genuine unity amongst themselves, the inhabitants of Ruby attempt to

perpetuate, as seen through the Christmas play, a unity based on legend and the memory of their forefathers. Even their forefathers, however, express a fragmented unity based on rejection and an attempt to placate their own legends of “ten generations” past. Furthermore, as Kilgour observes, “Bodily needs also indicate that the appearance of autonomy is an illusion, for the body must incorporate elements from outside itself in order to survive” (*Communion* 6). Even at the height of both towns’ successes, complete “autonomy” and unity within that isolated independence is “an illusion.” Food is necessarily obtained outwith the self, and bloodlines can only be kept for so long before they become inbred rather than “pure.”

The simplest example of the inherently fragmented and malnourishing natures of Haven, Ruby, and their populaces, however, is the Oven. In terms of food, Ruby literally cannot nourish itself, and the focus of the Founders soon becomes reflected in both the communal Oven that they build as well as in their progeny. The Oven is not simply a way to cook food or to provide a meeting place for the community (15). Rather, it is created as a direct response to the Disallowing and to the rejection of food. When building the Oven, Big Papa ensures that he inscribes the words “Beware the Furrow of His Brow” on its lip. Rather than “being a command to believers”, the words instead are “a threat to those who had disallowed them” (195). The Oven is built out of a pride stemming from the fact that “none of their women had ever worked in a white man’s kitchen or nursed a white man’s child [...]. It was that thinking that made a community ‘kitchen’ so agreeable” (99). The ability to sustain life through cooking and physical nourishment becomes inseparable from the “perpetuation” of life through isolationism and racial purity, and sustenance and cooking become intertwined with “the

clarity of their hatred” (189). For some of the inhabitants of Haven, those concepts literally become forged together through the Oven, and the “conundrum” (195) that Big Papa creates through the Oven’s cryptic words ironically results in “scattering” or dividing, rather than unifying the future generations of Haven. Deek and Steward Morgan leave Haven and transport the Oven to the newly founded town of Ruby when they feel their bloodlines and way of life are threatened. Afterwards, Deek claims, “There was no need to wonder if moving the Oven had been a mistake, whether it needed its original soil as foundation for the respect and wholesome utility that was its due. No. No, Big Papa. No, Big Daddy. We did right” (112). Steward and Deacon, more than Big Papa, then try to further the notions of racial purity and isolationism to the extent that they create a pact with God:

What new bargain had the twins struck? Did they really believe that no one died in Ruby? Suddenly Pat thought she knew all of it. Unadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe. That was their deal. For Immortality. (217)

Pat Best, a descendent of one of the Founding Families, is ostracized by some inhabitants because of her father’s marriage to a light-skinned outsider. She begins to compile an unofficial book of the towns’ histories and reaches the conclusion that Steward and Deacon “protect” Ruby from death, as long as residents remain dark-skinned and within the town. Their “recipe” for eternal life, however, does not involve “extending a hand in fellowship or love” (275). Instead, “they mapped defense [...] and honed evidence for its need, till each piece fit an already polished groove” (275), and it is evident that the habit of perpetuating life through fragmentation and shared isolation has been transferred from Haven to Ruby along with the Oven. Hatred and the “ideals”

that stem from it, which Big Papa tries to immortalize on the lip of the Oven, is handed down through the generations of Haven and Ruby until “recipes” and the Oven have little to do with food or nourishment. The developing situation in Ruby, passed on to them from Haven and from the “ten generations” before Haven, can also be viewed as an enactment of an observation of Montaigne’s in his essay “Of Cannibals.” While in Brazil, Montaigne lived amongst tribes that ate one another, not for nourishment, but as an act of revenge after war. He records one of the taunts of the prisoners about to be eaten, who says, ““Let them all dare to come and gather to feast on me, for with me they will feast on their own fathers and ancestors who have served as food and sustenance for my body”” (90). The prisoner alerts his captors to the fact that by eating him, they will also be consuming their own ancestors, who he has eaten in previous battles. In terms of Ruby, many residents are happy to subsist on the values of a long lineage of ancestors, and this concept is elaborated upon in chapter three. The “hatred” and isolation which passes to them as the “revenge” after the Disallowing are now all that remains of the Oven, and nourishment comes in the form of ancestral “ideals” that are inherited and consumed.

Despite the town’s efforts, the Oven has become a superficial representation of skewed beliefs rather than providing the “foundation” for “Immortality”:

Minus the baptisms the Oven had no real value. What was needed back in Haven’s early days was never needed in Ruby. The trucks they came in brought cookstoves as well. The meat they ate clucked in the yard, or fell on its knees under a hammer, or squealed through a slice in the throat. Unlike at Haven’s beginning, when Ruby was founded hunting game was a game. The women nodded when the men took the Oven apart, moved and reassembled it. But privately they resented the truck space given over to it – rather than a few more sacks of seed [...]. If the plaque was so important – and judging from the part of the meeting she [Soane] had

witnessed, she supposed it was – why hadn't they just taken it by itself, left the bricks where they had stood for fifty years? (103)

“A utility has become a shrine” (103), the Oven has begun “to destroy its own self” (104), and the baptisms that take place at it are only a fraction of what it once was. The Oven is no longer used to cook food for the community, and the rift between the men and the women of Haven, initiated through the rejection of food and the rescuing of baby Lone, continues in Ruby through the “resentment” of space given to a defunct symbol of nourishment rather than to the transportation of “seed.” Some of the letters from the Oven’s plaque are missing, and a debate over the meaning of the words on the Oven divides the town’s generations. Newer generations now congregate at the Oven defacing it, causing a “nagging, hateful pain” (102), and “cooking up devilment” (269). It has become a site for fornication, graffiti, violence, discord, and murder plots, and the passage indicates that hunting has become a game rather than a necessity or an attempt to provide. Obtaining and cooking food has become effortless, and notions of nourishment and shared isolation that were once conjoined through the Oven literally begin to fall apart. By itself, the Oven cannot sustain life in Haven or Ruby, the letters on its lip are loose and become lost, and it is no longer able to fulfill half of its purpose, which is to nourish. Instead, it has become usurped by hatred, an idealization of the past, and by the ill-forged words on its lip. By the end of the novel, “the Oven shifts, just slightly, on one side. The impacted ground on which it stands is undermined” (287). The Oven symbolically and literally loses the foundations upon which it was built. The “unity” of the Oven is forced by Big Papa, and its foundations, old and new, literal and symbolic, are “undermined.” The condition of the Oven and its various stages of use

and misuse ultimately represent the condition of Ruby and its inhabitants. It symbolizes and provides an outlet for their beliefs, and it becomes either a valuable or cumbersome remnant of the past. Overall, while the Oven embodies the novel's thematic focuses, such as fragmentation and unity, it also charts, through the generations, the towns' gradual inabilities to feed, nourish, and sustain life. And all of the intended original functions of the Oven – to feed, to unify, and to warn - are “undermined” and usurped by its skewed foundations of rejection, fragmentation, hatred, and disillusionment.

“Gastronomical Joylessness”³

The communal disinterest in or misrepresentation of nourishment is further reflected, on an individual level, in the twins' relationships with their wives. In *Food and Gender: Identity and Power*, Carole Counihan describes the power struggles inherent in humans' relationships with food and each other:

First, there is the power that society allocates or denies to man and woman through their access to and control of one essential resource: food. Men's and women's ability to produce, provide, distribute, and consume food is a measure of their power [...]. The second sense of power we examine is personal power: whether men's and women's relationship to food and its meanings contribute to a valued sense of self. (1-2)

Counihan maintains that food and one's ability to use and procure it are a measure of a person's power, and that relationships between men and women are frequently illustrated through food usage and consumption. In terms of the twins and their marriages, the fragmentation begun with the Disallowing and perpetuated through the Oven gradually begins to manifest itself in their relationships with their wives, and the

³ E.M. Forster, qtd. in Peckham, 177.

ways in which food is perceived, obtained, and consumed increases the distance between them.

Steward's wife Dovey, sleeping alone at their house in town while Steward sleeps at their ranch, reflects on their marriage. Her contemplations are propelled by thoughts of "what she would fix for supper" (81) and of her male "Friend", who mysteriously and occasionally appears to her when she is alone. Dovey's ruminations on Steward and her Friend both revolve around food but are vastly different. With Steward, Dovey vacillates between worrying about satisfying him, determining that "canned peas would do just fine" (93), and "look[ing] at the floorboards and wonder[ing] what visible shape his loss would take now" (87). As Dovey "thought about her husband, it was in terms of what he had lost. His sense of taste one example of the many she counted" (82). Loss is reflected not only in the absence of Steward's taste but in their relationship, and the desire to nourish or be nourished has disappeared along with his taste buds. Steward's sense of taste then begins to be a reflection of his interaction with the world around him. According to Brillat-Savarin's observations:

Taste seems to possess two main functions.

- (1) It invites us, by arousing our pleasures, to repair the constant losses which we suffer through our physical existence.
- (2) It helps us to choose from the variety of substances which Nature presents to us those which are best adapted to nourish us. (45)

Brillat-Savarin maintains that without taste, nourishment is difficult or arbitrary, and fulfillment or satisfaction is overcome by losses. His comments also indicate an affinity between nature, taste, and nourishment, and the fact that Steward has lost his sense of taste implies more than a simple division between him and Dovey. As Steward accumulates wealth and material possessions, Dovey notes that he loses more of the

values that she feels give meaning to life: the sale of most of their ranch results in the loss of trees and beauty, and he is unable to have children. With the knowledge that “his taste buds faltered over time”, Dovey ponders what to cook for dinner:

It didn't matter whether her peas were garden fresh or canned. Convent peppers, hot as hellfire, did the cooking for her. The trouble it took to cultivate peas was wasted. A teaspoon of sugar and a plop of butter in canned ones would do nicely, since the bits of purple-black pepper he would sprinkle over them bombed away any quiet flavor. (82)

As implied by Brillat-Savarin's observations, there is a distinct lack of “naturalness” in the dinner that Dovey contemplates. The peas are not only canned, but their original taste is altered by the additions of sugar, butter, and hot peppers. The use of both canned peas and Convent peppers further illustrate Dovey's and Steward's inability to grow food for themselves, and despite Steward's extreme aversion to outsiders, Dovey's dinnertime thoughts show that he is, as Ward claims, being “nurtured and sustained by life-forces outside” of himself (195). However, the fact that Steward is unable to taste enables him to distance himself from the food he consumes.

Noting the genesis story of Adam and Eve, Kilgour claims:

To think is to taste, as in the act of knowledge we imagine that we draw the outer world into our minds and possess it. All of our senses make contact with the world outside of our own bodies and so may be imagined as introducing it into ourselves [...]. As a model for knowing, taste is not only the most basic and bodily way of making contact with the world outside of the individual but also the most intimate and intense way. (*Communion* 9)

Kilgour applies metaphorical and literal meanings to taste. Her statement indicates that taste allows the individual not only to assimilate with the outside world but to possess knowledge of it. Because Steward's taste buds are “absent”, he is able, through ignorance, to maintain yet another level of separation between himself and the external

world. A consequence of his lack of taste, however, is a failure to understand the world around him and to achieve a fuller sense of “intimacy” with his wife. Ideas of taste and the division it causes between Steward and Dovey are furthered by Shubal’s belief that “the distinctly personal nature of the eating we do and don’t do is also made apparent by the fact that we can never know if what we taste is what another tastes, even if we’re drinking from the same cup or eating off the same plate” (3). Shubal’s statement implies that eating is not merely a “personal” act, but an isolated one. Taste can never be truly shared or understood, it automatically creates divisions between people, and the idea of “sharing” a meal takes on a new meaning. Shubal’s and Kilgour’s beliefs, in terms of Steward, are complementary: Kilgour maintains that taste creates a bond with the natural, external world at large, and Shubal claims that taste, and the external “knowledge” that comes with it, cannot be transmitted between two people. As much as is possible, Steward attempts to reject the assimilation inherent in eating by rejecting the knowledge that comes with taste. His lack of taste causes additional separation in a sensation that is already difficult to describe or share with another. Steward ultimately, through the loss of taste, maintains layers of division between himself and others. Not only does he “disallow” interaction with the external community and the natural world, but his loss of taste also illustrates an inherent separation between him and Dovey.

Dovey and Steward, as evidenced by food preparation and the reliance on the Convent’s produce, attempt to camouflage rather than heal their losses, and Dovey’s eventual decision to use “canned” rather than “garden peas” (81) is a stark contrast to her reflections regarding her Friend. When he first appears, Dovey begins a discussion about “pumpkin colored” butterflies (91) with “persimmon wings” (92), and “once, she

fed him a slice of bread loaded with apple butter and he ate it all” (92). The Friend continues to visit Dovey intermittently for “a chat, a bite, [or] cool water on a parched afternoon” (92), and because of his visits, Dovey is inspired to “fix up” the “trashy” (93) garden at the town property. Her Friend’s tendencies to appear and disappear, and the descriptions of food, butterflies, and the garden, not only add an air of mystery, but one of freedom, nourishment, and hunger satisfied. It seems for Dovey, in Gronow’s words, that “pleasure cannot be separated from taste [...] nor taste from pleasure” (1). While the pleasures of life seem to be restricted and draining from Steward, Dovey experiences a sense of new life in providing and growing for another what she cannot for her husband. Again, as in the foundings of both Haven and Ruby, a division is seen between men’s and women’s views of food and nourishment. These views of nourishment and the handling and perception of food in turn influence not only how life is perpetuated but how life is lived.

As well as Dovey’s relationships with Steward and her Friend, her sister, Soane’s relationship with Deacon is also illustrated through food. One morning, when Deacon goes out to hunt quail, Soane reflects:

“Look out, quail. Deek’s gunning for you. And when he comes back he’ll throw a sackful of you on my clean kitchen floor and say something like: ‘This ought to take care of supper.’ Proud. Like he’s giving me a present. Like you were already plucked and cleaned and cooked.” (100)

The image of the hunted, shot quail connects the novel. Hunting is a reminder of the novel’s opening line that “they shoot the white girl first” (3), and it foreshadows the later mention that the Convent women themselves will be “hunted” (266) by the men of Ruby. Eventually, it is not just quail that lay on a clean kitchen floor, but by the end of

the novel, a clean kitchen also contains the shot body of a Convent woman (292). The images also provide a stark contrast to the townswomen's feeling of safety "because nothing [...] thought they were prey" (9). The idea of the Convent women being "prey" (266) as opposed to the idea of the Ruby women being safe is yet another illustration of the New Founders' fragmenting opinions of inside and outside, internal and external, and self and other.

The passage also describes Deacon's "hunting" capabilities as well as his views of what nourishes and how to obtain and provide it. Soane's ruminations are then contrasted with Deacon's reflection that "shooting well that morning had settled him and returned things to the way they ought to be. Coffee the right color; the right temperature. And later today, quail without their brains would melt in his mouth" (107). The episode establishes a difference, not only between men's and women's thoughts, but between men's and women's roles and how they are perceived. Violence has become "settling" and "shooting" has enabled Deek to comfort himself and to feel as though he has provided "enough to take care of two suppers" (105). There is also something simplistic in Deek's thoughts and in the hunting of the quail, as though their deaths are the end of the process. Soane, however, realizes that their deaths are just the beginning and that the much greater, more refined, and less primitive tasks of "plucking, cleaning, and cooking" remain. The differences in their contemplations are also a parallel to the differences articulated by Krumholz that "The New Fathers of Ruby want a paradise of continuity, stability, and immortality, whereas the women of Ruby and the Convent envision a haven of [...] transformation, birth, death, and rebirth" (25). Krumholz identifies the division between the sexes and between communities, and ideas of

stagnated, linear continuity are contrasted with notions of cyclical change and new life. Deacon simply views the world in terms of death and “Immortality”, but even in cooking preparations, Soane perceives the life and the work that continue after death. However, it is not until the Convent women are “hunted” that these notions of life, death, rebirth, and work are fully illustrated.

Soane’s unvoiced thoughts also further Counihan’s argument in *Food and Gender*:

Men can exert power over women by refusing to provide food or by refusing to eat or disparaging the food they have cooked. Women can also exert power over men by refusing to cook, controlling their food, or manipulating the status and meaning systems embodied in foods. (7)

Counihan illustrates the power inherent in the obtaining, preparing, and consumption of food, as well as in the ability of food to create separation between men and women. Deacon and Soane, however, precariously manage to balance such power struggles: Deacon feels as though he is providing, and rather than voicing her disparaging thoughts concerning his “accomplishments”, Soane prepares the quail for dinner. For as different as Deacon and Soane’s thoughts may be concerning the quail, their hunting, and their preparation, the couple maintains an outward appearance of harmony. Soane’s unvoiced opinions on Deacon’s quail hunting, as well as Dovey’s unvoiced thoughts on Steward’s losses, however, illustrate a fabricated, rather than an actual unity, and both women perceive a senselessness in the food they feel obligated to prepare for their husbands. In Dovey’s case, it is because Steward cannot taste, and in Soane’s case, it is because hunting has become a game rather than a necessity. In the words of M.F.K. Fisher:

I believe that one of the most dignified ways we are capable of, to assert and then reassert our own dignity [...] is to nourish ourselves with all

possible skill, delicacy, and ever-increasing enjoyment. And with our gastronomical growth will come, inevitably, knowledge and perceptions of a hundred other things, but mainly of ourselves. (350)

Overall, ideas of preparing, providing, and tasting food, as illustrated by Haven, Ruby, and their inhabitants, leads one to question their ability to know themselves, to know others, and to achieve any sort of salvation.

To Each Her Own Food

Deacon, Soane, Dovey, Steward, and the Oven all illustrate struggles with nourishment, food, and how to perpetuate life within the town of Ruby. However, the women who live in the Convent on Ruby's outskirts also face dilemmas over sustenance, and they struggle to reconcile body, mind, and soul. Connie, who is adopted as a child by Mary Magna, the Mother Superior, is the first of the novel's main characters to arrive at the Convent, and she later takes ownership of its garden and kitchen. While she struggles with her own pain and drinking problems, she eventually experiences an epiphany where body and soul become united. An integral part of her epiphany is her ability to feed herself physically and spiritually. As Connie learns to nourish herself, she begins to teach the other women at the Convent "what [they] are hungry for" (262), and intertwined with the women's journeys to salvation is an emphasis on the relationship between physical, mental, and spiritual nourishment.

Unlike the people of Ruby, the Convent women, as Parker claims, discover "a hunger that bonds rather than destroys, a means of connection rather than the product of alienation" (641-642). While the women initially experience a variety of eating disorders that stem from past pain, a history of malnourishment, and a current rejection from the nearby Ruby, they eventually translate their isolating food habits into a positive

communal and shared experience. This experience results in, as Telfer maintains, “the duty to eat healthily oneself, and so be fit to perform one’s duties to others. Duties to oneself likewise include a duty to eat healthily [...] in order to perform one’s duties to oneself, which consist [...] in the choice and pursuit of ideals” (4). Put simply, Telfer’s comment furthers the concept of assimilation. Food not only allows a connection between self and other and internal and external, but Telfer claims that eating “healthily” can even be deemed a social responsibility where one’s capacity to contribute to the whole is directly affected by what one consumes. If one eats healthily and can contribute to the surrounding community, then shared ideals can be perpetuated. In other words, shared food can result in the successful attainment of shared beliefs. While characters struggle to unite body and soul, they also feast and fast, binge and purge, self-harm and engage in fist fights. Schwartz and Gay maintain that “Eating, bingeing, purging, or starving are all automatic, self-destructive responses, which function to create numbing and keep the trauma from intruding or to escape the intolerable feelings of depersonalization” (99). Schwartz and Gay’s statement implies that detrimental eating behaviors are the results of external abuse, and that victims often feel as though they regain lost control through altering their eating habits. Bynum further believes that “women’s concentration on food enable[s] them to manipulate both their bodies and their environment” (“Fast” 132). The Convent women’s treatment of their bodies and what is consumed, perceived, and projected by their bodies, is in direct correlation with their handling of food.

Gradually, as Connie heals herself, she begins to heal the women around her. Through a careful distribution of food, the Convent women stop their erratic and self-

harming eating habits. As their perceptions of food alter, so do their perceptions of their bodies, and even the Convent's garden and kitchen begin to illustrate the transformative powers of food. As Buford claims:

I sometimes think of this condition [whether or not food is serious] as the charisma of food, its capacity to be everything. It is identity, and culture, and history. It is science, and nature, and botany. It is the earth. It is our family, our philosophy, our past. It is the most important matter in our lives. It is more than its ingredients. It is transcendent [...]. But it is also just dinner. (xiii)

Buford notes food's ability to be all-encompassing and to touch almost every aspect of life. Food is indicative of the various ways in which the individual and the community choose to conduct and live life, and the ability to nourish as well as the means of procuring and providing nourishment then have a direct influence on characters' behaviors. The detrimental effects of confused nourishment that are seen in Steward, Deacon, and their relationships are also depicted in the Convent women. However, while it seems that Steward and Deacon may or may not overcome their malnourishment and forever view food as "just dinner", the Convent women, with the help of Connie and her plentiful garden, eventually embark on "transcendental" journeys where they are able to discover themselves and community.

The Convent's garden and kitchen, as well as illustrating the eating habits of the women, also provide a connection between the Convent and Ruby from the beginning of the novel. *Paradise* begins with the statement, "They shoot the white woman first" (3), which presents an image of death, violence, and mystery; however, the novel also begins by stating that the residents of Ruby would go to the Convent to "pick up a string of peppers" (3) that would "grow nowhere outside the Convent's garden", the peppers are

famed for their rareness and heat, and they provide an excuse for interaction as well as evidence of the Convent's "harmlessness" (11). The Convent becomes known for growing and selling the peppers, and initially the produce illustrates a link between Ruby and the Convent. Marcel Mauss discusses acts of food sharing and purchasing and asserts, "In the systems of the past we do not find simple exchanges of goods, wealth, and produce through markets established among individuals. For it is groups, and not individuals which carry on exchange, make contracts, and are bound by obligation" (3). Mauss maintains that food purchases can imply more than money and that a sense of indebtedness or obligation can accompany the exchange, and he notes that markets indicate community. The residents of Ruby can be seen as becoming increasingly reliant on the autonomous Convent women. An imbalance is soon created between the two communities, which is later illustrated through a description of the town's gardens, where the men of Ruby appear unable to reciprocate the food exchanges or to lessen their obligations.

Connie tells Mavis, who is the next woman to arrive at the Convent, that she sells the town, "'Garden things. Things I cook up. Things they don't want to grow themselves'" (40). Parker suggests "that equality is synonymous with the sharing of food and that nourishment of the self need not entail destruction of the other" (640), and she believes that food sharing can permit a harmonious balance between self and other. However, Kilgour states, "As it is obvious at the most basic level that the circumference contains the center, in order to maintain a situation of centripetal control, what is outside must be subsumed and drawn into the center until there is no category of alien outsideness left to threaten the inner stability" (*Communion* 5). Kilgour relates

consumption, once again, to assimilation. As opposed to Parker, she illustrates that assimilation occurs by usurping outside substances and gradually incorporating them into the center of the self. In this way, things are no longer “alien” and everything is self. In terms of the Convent’s peppers, what initially appears to be a simple act of buying and selling is instead an opportunity for the men of Ruby to attempt to incorporate the Convent women and their produce into their safely predetermined senses of self and community. Ultimately, the men of Ruby fail to incorporate anything more than peppers from the Convent, the women remain forever “other”, and the men come to believe that the women “threaten the inner stability” of the town.

Connie’s sales not only illustrate the loss of a potential reciprocal relationship between the Convent and Ruby, but they also illustrate the dependency of Ruby on the Convent for things they cannot or will not grow. By the end of the novel, the peppers and the garden reflect the growing disparity between the Convent women and the residents of Ruby. The peppers start to illustrate Ruby’s inability to be fully autonomous as well as its inability to control, not just the Convent and its women, but the land on which everyone resides. Ruby’s gardens have stopped producing food, and in addition to the misused Oven and the ill-represented Nativity play, they have little to do with nourishment and have either become filled with “trash” or objects of ornamentation:

The habit, the interest in cultivating plants that could not be eaten, spread, and so did the ground surrendered to it. Exchanging, sharing a cutting here, a root there, a bulb or two became so frenetic a land grab, husbands complained of neglect and the disappointingly small harvest of radishes, or the too short rows of collards, beets. The women kept on with the vegetable gardens in the back, but little by little its produce became like the flowers – driven by desire, not necessity. (89-90)

The gardens in Ruby reflect a desire to decorate, rather than to nourish the town, and much like the Oven and Ruby itself, the gardens have lost their fundamental purpose. It seems that once the sustaining properties of the land in Ruby are usurped in disagreement, division, and superficial ornamentation, the residents of Ruby must look outside of the town to the Convent for the “things they don’t want to grow” or resort to violence in order to obtain them. Ruby’s gardens are yet another indication of a false sense of autonomy as well as an inability to nourish.

While Ruby and its residents struggle with various eating habits, each of the Convent women in the novel is also associated in some way with food, and each woman’s relationship with food is charted from her initial appearance in both the novel and the Convent, through to the end of the work and her salvation. Ward claims that through eating itself, “the body becomes a site for continual transformation” (199). For instance, Gigi, who arrives at the Convent after Mavis, has a conversation with a man named Dice on a train. Initially thinking his name stood for ““chopping small””, Gigi soon learns from him, not only that his name stands for ““pair of””, but that Ruby, Oklahoma, is home to a place where two fig trees ““grew in each other’s arms”” as well as to ““the best rhubarb pie in the nation”” (66). Professing to ““hate rhubarb””, Gigi makes her way to Ruby in search of it and the trees that “if you squeezed between them in just the right way, well, you would feel an ecstasy no human could invent or duplicate” (66). She then alights from the bus to Ruby “in front of a giant barbecue grill”, or the Oven, where “fine dust, fine as flour, sifted into her eyes, her mouth” (67), and claims to be looking for ““rhubarb pie”” (56). Gigi’s initial appearance in the novel

and in Ruby is intertwined with images and thoughts of food, and she not only misassociates Dice's name but also feigns a quest for something she hates, which indicates a simultaneous preoccupation with and rejection of food. She also steps off of the bus into something camouflaging and dull that obscures her ability to see and to taste but that does not prevent the boys at the Oven from scrutinizing her body. She is temporarily lost, misguided, and blinded, and she has little control over how her body is perceived or assessed.

The sensation of a loss of control, intertwined with images and thoughts of food, as well as through the flour-like dust and the loitering boys at the Oven, is perpetuated upon her arrival at the Convent. Once there, Gigi sees a picture of St. Catherine of Siena, who she nicknames the "I-give woman." The "I-give woman [is] serving up her breasts like two baked Alaskas on a platter" (73), or as Gigi later describes, St. Catherine's "pudding tits [are] exposed on a plate", "holding up her present on a platter to a lord" (74). Gubar, in "'The Blank Page' and Issues of Female Creativity" references Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* when commenting that "*The Dinner Party* plates also imply that women, who have served, have been served up and consumed. They therefore remind us of the sacrificial nature of the body 'dressed' as art" (252). Referencing St. Catherine of Siena, Bynum states, "Not only did medieval people associate humanity as body with woman; they also associated woman's body with food. Woman was food because breast milk was the human being's first nourishment – the one food essential for survival" ("Fast" 133). With St. Catherine's picture and Gubar's and Bynum's observations, body parts and food are interchangeable. In this instance, St. Catherine is viewed by Gigi, not as a woman who uses fasting to gain control of her

body and its functions, but as a woman who is there to be assessed and consumed. It further illustrates fragmentation in the severance of her breasts as well as an unnamed or anonymous subservience, and the body becomes both irrelevant and all-important. It is simultaneously the center of focus and yet it is being dismembered and sacrificed. The picture of St. Catherine of Siena raises questions, not only of what nourishes or of how to nourish, but at what cost. Ellmann maintains that fasting can be a “self-defeating protest since it is women who become the victims of their own revolt; they collude in their oppression” (2). Ellmann notes the tendency of hunger strikes to end in death, thus, to an extent, granting “victory” to the oppressor; however, Ellmann’s view, in this case, relates purely to the physical, bodily aspects of fasting. In terms of St. Catherine, there is also a spiritual aspect to her behavior. Bynum claims:

To Catherine, ‘to eat’ and ‘to hunger’ have the same fundamental meaning, for one eats but is never full, desires but is never satiated. ‘Eating’ and ‘hungering’ are active, not passive images. They stress pain more than joy. They mean most basically to suffer and to serve – to suffer because in hunger one joins with Christ’s suffering on the cross; to serve because hunger is to expiate the sins of the world. (“Fast” 127)

What is not yet evident to Gigi is the potential strength in Catherine’s sacrificial body. It may appear broken and incomplete, but through the sacrifice of her body, Catherine purposefully strives to attain a selfless spiritual strength.

It is the flux between consuming and being consumed, or assessing and being assessed, that manifests itself in Gigi’s “gobbling” (70), ravenous, “legitimate mourner”-like feasting (69) when she first arrives in the Convent’s kitchen. It seems she is trying to compensate for the rejection of food and rhubarb pie that surrounds her train journey; however, her mindless feasting also perpetuates the loss of control she experiences when

she steps off of the bus into Ruby. She thoughtlessly and uncontrollably stuffs food into her mouth, and later, she eats “jam-covered bread” (74) while meeting and analyzing K.D. Gigi’s gorging during her first meeting with K.D. also illustrates Kilgour’s claim that “sex is an incomplete act of incorporation [and] may be seen as intensifying desire to the point where it becomes transformed into aggression” (*Communion* 8). Sex, unlike food, only allows temporary assimilation, and Gigi later “spits K.D. out like a grape seed” (259). Her discarding of K.D. leads to his participation in the later hunting of the women, and he takes every opportunity to disparage her. Food and the way it is perceived, eaten, and assessed permeates Gigi’s presence in the novel; however, it is not until the end of *Paradise* when Connie teaches the women how to eat, or in other words, how to nourish and end the conflict between their bodies and minds, that Gigi can truly transform herself.

Seneca too, who arrives after Gigi, is associated with food and eating throughout the novel, and her relationship with food exemplifies her confusion, abandonment, and tendencies to self-harm. Her conflicted relationship with herself and food begins when her “sister” Jean abandons her as a child. The meatloaf, string beans, white bread, and Kool-Aid that Jean leaves on the kitchen table (127) after her departure represent, not love or nourishment, but abandonment, temporary sustenance, and an unappetizing confusion. Relating food to symbol, Eagleton states, “A sign expresses something but also stands in for its absence, so that a child may be unsure whether receiving nourishment from its mother’s hands or breasts is a symbol of her affection or a replacement for it” (204). In terms of Seneca and her “sister”, food indeed acts as a replacement not only for parental affection, but for the parent. After six days of waiting

for Jean's return, Seneca finds a note from her in a box of Lorna Doones. Seneca had tried to be "good" and to do "everything right without being told" (127), hoping that Jean would return; however, the fact that the note was found amongst the sugary, innutritious cookies creates a sense of helplessness in Seneca. It seems her prayers and attempts to be good and to eat "good" are meaningless, and abandonment and food then become intertwined with abuse.

After Jean's departure, Seneca is placed in a home where her foster brother rapes her. During the rape, "a safety pin holding the waist of her jeans together where a metal button used to be opened and scratched her stomach as Harry yanked on them [...]. The line of blood excited him even more" (260). Afterwards, Seneca receives sympathy from Mama Greer, her foster mother, for the cut on her stomach, which encourages her to "pin-scratch herself on purpose" (260). Since the second pin-scratch is met with less sympathy, Seneca tells Mama Greer about Harry. Mama Greer denies the possibility of the incident, and instead, "after a meal of [Seneca's] favorite things", sends her to another foster home (261). Schwartz and Cohn state:

A [...] critical question is why early trauma would influence eating behavior. [...] One fundamental reason is that eating is often associated with family meals, nurturing, and proof that parents care for children. Thus, feeding and then abusing the child are incongruent, confusing, and difficult to assimilate and integrate. (xi)

Early abandonment and abuse, entangled with food, results in confusion and a new personality for Seneca in foster care where "she knew it was not her self that the mothers had approved of but the fact that she took reprimand quietly, ate what given, shared what she had and never ever cried" (135). Seneca becomes a subservient mediator, trying to go unnoticed, expressing herself only through the "streets" (262) she carves in her arms

and legs. Her “streets” and lack of tears are reminiscent of Irigaray’s idea that “women do not manage to articulate their madness: they suffer it directly in their body” (74) as well as Gubar’s notion that “the creation of the female art feels like the destruction of the female body” (256). Seneca’s relationship with food is a direct indication of her relationship with her body, and she is unable to articulate or to heal her physical and mental wounds.

When she is older, after her boyfriend, Eddie Turtle, gets put into jail for a hit-and-run involving a child, Seneca brings him lunch when she visits him; however, “he was too nervous and irritated to eat” and she puts “mustard instead of mayo on the sandwiches” (132). Again, in this instance, food does not highlight nourishment or comfort, and it serves only to illustrate distance, miscommunication, and disconnect between two people. Even when Seneca meets Eddie’s mother, Mrs. Turtle, she finds no sustenance at the table. Similarly to Gigi’s journey and the rhubarb pie, Seneca is told by a guard at the bus station that there is ““Good barbecue in Wichita. Make sure you get some”” (133). Instead of barbecue, Seneca is met by the “strictly vegetarian” household of Mrs. Turtle, who serves “seven grains and seven greens” believing if you “eat one of each (and only one) each day, you lived forever” (133). Seneca receives conflicting advice from the security guard and Mrs. Turtle, and the meatless meal does nothing to assuage her hunger or confusion. She returns to the bus station, purchasing peanuts and ginger ale “when she really wanted sweet, not salt” (134). Seneca does not know her own appetite and she cannot help to soothe others’. Food becomes either something unattainable, like the “sweet” craving and the barbecue, or something unpalatable, like the peanuts, the wrongly condimented sandwich, and Mrs. Turtle’s

wheat bread and kale. Immediately after leaving Mrs. Turtle's house, Seneca is approached outside of the bus station by a woman named Norma Fox. Mrs. Fox has her chauffeur proposition Seneca and treats her "like a pet you wanted to play with for a while – a little while – but not keep. Not love. Not name it. Just feed it, play with it, then return it to its own habitat" (138), and Mrs. Fox alternates between feeding her "food too pretty to eat" and "filth" (137). Throughout her life, Seneca is offered temporary love, temporary shelter, temporary food, and even temporary abuse. Seneca's life has formed a pattern much like the streets she carves on her body: Jean cooks for her and then leaves her, Mama Greer cooks her favorite meal and then finds her other housing, Mrs. Turtle instills her vegetarian values and then does not "offer a bed for the night" (134), and finally, Mrs. Fox feeds her a combination of fried chicken, caviar, and filth for three weeks before returning her to the streets. When she finally arrives at the Convent, Mavis offers her fried chicken, causing Seneca to feel as though "she would throw up" (131), and chicken becomes a reminder of her recent experiences. Food becomes inseparable from abuse and abandonment, and Seneca begins to express her hunger and confusion on her body in "streets", which unlike the nourishment she has received so far, are permanent. Like Gigi, Seneca must be taught how to eat and how to nourish her self by Connie, where her body and mind will no longer be at war with one another.

As well as Seneca and Gigi, Pallas, the last to arrive at the Convent, also has issues with food and her body, and throughout the novel, she is consistently seen bingeing and purging. The description of Pallas's past mentions her relationship with her school's janitor Carlos, which not only begins over a broken down car, but over a

chili dog where “Pallas’ mouth had gone felt with the thrill of it all” (167). Their relationship culminates in months spent with her mother “eating wonderful food” (168). At the same time, however, Carlos “had killed Pallas’s appetite. [...] Food, other than that first chili dog was a nuisance to her [...]. The pounds she had struggled with since elementary school melted away [...]. His betrayal when she was at her trimmest sharpened her shame” (178-179). Pallas begins to associate her appetite and eating habits with the betrayal of Carlos sleeping with her mother. Bynum claims “that gorging and vomiting, luxuriating in food until food and body were almost synonymous, became in folk literature an image of unbridled sensual pleasure” (“Fast” 122), and that “women themselves connected food abstinence with chastity and greed with sexual desire” (“Fast” 130). During her time with Carlos, Pallas’s fluctuating appetite matches her fluctuating sexuality. Carlos “kills appetite”, but then feeds her a chili dog and eventually “makes love to her” (167). Pallas is once more no longer interested in eating until indulging in “gorgeous food” with her mother, after which she witnesses Carlos and her mother “exchanging moans in the grass” (169). The actions that Carlos and her mother take cause Pallas to question her perception, not only of the world and those around her, but of her body. Associated with food are notions of what warrants beauty, trust, love, and sexuality, and Pallas begins to feast and fast, binge and purge in an effort to control her body and her perception of self.

In addition to a past of feasting and fasting, Pallas’s arrival at the Convent is timed with the ill-fated wedding feast of K.D. and Arnette. The feast, organized by Soane, involves literal “roast lamb” and a figurative “marriage supper of the Lamb” (144). The eating of the roast lamb and the idea of the Lamb of God create a tension

between ideas of slaughter and reconciliation. This is further paralleled in the fact that Soane invites the Convent women to the feast in an effort to celebrate unity and a union, only to have the invitation result in a multitude of fights and discontent. The discord culminates, not just in the Convent girls' flamboyant bike-riding or their eventual departure, but in Dovey cutting her finger when "removing the fat from a lamb slice" (157). The wedding feast, which should have been a celebration of harmony and union, is instead an illustration of fragmentation where the guests, food, music, bridal couple, and even the references to God result in confusion and disharmony. Pallas's arrival, along with feasting, is also rife with nausea and vomit from both "the smell of Gigi's bubble gum mixed with her cigarette smoke" (163) and from the baloney and onion sandwich previously given to her by an Indian woman. Pallas "found herself eating all of it [the baloney sandwich] like a dog, gulping, surprised by her hunger" only to "lose" the sandwich later by "retching violently" (174). This is followed by second and third helpings of "leftover bread pudding" (180) at the Convent that allowed "all of the day's unruly drama [to dissipate] in the pleasure of chewing food" (179). Pallas's eating disorders culminate when she temporarily leaves the Convent, and she finds that "everything she ate added a pound in spite of the fact that she threw most of it up" (255). At this point in the novel, Pallas is truly lost, she is in denial of the fact that she is pregnant, can make no sense of her body, and is unable to reconcile her mind and eating disorders with her body. She is badly nourished, and like the other women at the Convent, she must be taught to temper her eating habits.

Out of all of the women who arrive at the Convent, however, Mavis is most associated with food. She first appears in the novel in her own home, picking potato

chip crumbs out of her couch and finger nails and being interviewed by reporters about the deaths of two of her children. The twins Merle and Perle, much like L's pork chops, end up being "smothered" in a "mint green Cadillac" on a hot day while Mavis is grocery shopping (21). The suffocation of the children occurs because Mavis does not want to feed her abusive husband Spam, because her existing chuck steak goes "green" and begins to rot, and because she decides to go out for "weenies" (22). Rotting, canned, and processed meat underlie Mavis's tragedy, and the quest for nourishment, spurred by rot and resulting in death is articulated by Lupton, who claims, "Food is a metonym of the mortality of human flesh, the inevitable entropy of living matter. Food is therefore a source of great ambivalence: it forever threatens contamination and bodily impurity, but is necessary for survival and is the source of great pleasure and contentment" (3). Lupton's comment implies inherent danger and pleasure, as well as uncertainty, in food. Food can simultaneously be death and life, health and sickness. Furthermore, Mavis not only tries and fails to nourish but attempts to control her husband's temper through carefully cooked meals; however, "the perfect meat loaf (not too loose, not too tight)" (25) only results in an awkward, unwanted, and one-sided sexual encounter between them. The meal additionally results in Billy James, one of her surviving children, spitting "Kool-Aid into Mavis's plate" (25). Mavis attempts, through food, to placate and nourish herself and her family. Instead, food illustrates her loss of control and her inability to help her children or herself, and her cooking and attempts to nourish result in rot, death, and abuse.

Soon after the awkward and abusive sexual encounter with her husband, Mavis intentionally leaves the house through the front door, "does not look toward the kitchen

and never [sees] it again” (27). The kitchen, for the moment, houses her incompetencies, failures, and weaknesses. According to Heller and Moran, “That ‘room of one’s own’, the kitchen, can serve as the locale for female authority [...] or for the nostalgic reanimation of the stable ‘feeding mother’ of fifties ideology” (3). Mavis’s attempts at controlled nourishment are also an attempt to emulate her mother; however, Mavis cannot keep food from spoiling, she cannot predict her husband’s abuse, and she cannot protect her children from death nor prevent them from “playing” in her food (25). After taking her husband’s Cadillac, Mavis flees to her mother Birdie’s house where they proceed to eat breakfast together:

Quite a bit of the fried potatoes were still in her mother’s plate. “You going to eat those, Ma?”

Birdie pushed her plate toward Mavis. There was a tiny square of liver, too, and some onions. Mavis scraped it all onto her plate. [...]

The liver was a miracle. Her mother always got every particle of the tight membrane off. (31)

The scene is an echo of Billy James’s interaction with Mavis, but Birdie seems able to provide what Mavis cannot. While Birdie offers and shares well-prepared food, her abilities are temporary. Mavis’s mind is still not healed, and she leaves her mother’s house and kitchen dissatisfied.

Despite all of this, Mavis’s determination to assert control through food and cooking continues upon her arrival at the Convent where even “the sun, watermelon red, looked edible” (37). In Connie’s kitchen, as opposed to her own and her mother’s, Mavis “felt safe” and “the thought of leaving it disturbed her” (41). She soon finds a therapeutic comfort, under Connie’s direction, in shelling pecans (42). Her attempts to find control through cooking then continue to the point where they punctuate and

underlie her fights with Gigi. When Mavis temporarily leaves the Convent to get medication for Mary Magna, the dying Mother Superior, she returns to find a naked Gigi at the house, and a conversation ensues between Connie, Mavis, and Gigi:

“You haven’t been eating?” Mavis shot a cold look at Gigi.
“A bit. Funeral foods. But now I’ll cook fresh.”
“There’s plenty,” said Gigi. “We haven’t even touched the —”
“You put some clothes on!”
“You kiss my ass!” (76)

In Mavis’s absence, Connie and Gigi subsist on foods others have made for them, and it is not simply Gigi’s nakedness that offends Mavis but the fact that she has not fed or cooked for Connie. The women are instead eating food prepared by the women of Ruby, and Mavis views the situation as a loss of authority. Learning of Mary Magna’s death, Soane “collect[s] food from neighbor women and cook[s] some things herself. She, Dovey, and Anna carried it out there [to the Convent], knowing full well there was no one to eat it but themselves” (101). Food has become a gesture of sympathy, peace, and a sign of concern between the women of the town and Convent. However, despite the unity it brings between the women of Ruby and the Convent, it causes discord and fragmentation between Mavis and Gigi. The food, by the time Mavis arrives, is seven days old and no longer “fresh” (76). Just like the putrid chuck steak and the quest for “weenies” that surround Merle and Perle’s deaths, Mavis returns to the Convent to find an undernourished Connie, a dead Mary Magna, and a household full of rotting food.

The initial altercation with Gigi soon results in a series of fights. After leaving Soane’s wedding feast, Mavis pulls the Cadillac to the side of the road to engage in another dispute with Gigi:

“Exhibitionist bitch! Soane is a friend of ours. What do I tell her now?”

“She’s Connie’s friend. Nothing to do with you.”
“I’m the one sell her the peppers, make up her tonic....”
“Whazzat make you, a chemist? It’s just rosemary, a little bran mixed with aspirin.”
“Whatever it is, it’s my responsibility.” (167)

Once again, Mavis tries to regain control in her life by distributing food. Gigi, however, undermines her “authority”, turning the tonic into something mundane, ordinary, and Connie’s. Spurred by a feast and propelled by food commentary, the words exchanged between Mavis and Gigi result in a physical fight which illustrates parallels between food, dominance, and bodily abuse, and neither woman has control over her own body, let alone another’s. The fact that Mavis tries to nourish in Connie’s stead is negated not only through Gigi’s retorts, but through the fact that Gigi is chain smoking throughout the entire ordeal. Food becomes divisive and something unmanageable rather than unifying or comforting, and the association between food and fighting reaches its peak after the roadside incident. When they return, “an elated Mavis” begins to prepare chicken and tortillas for supper, reflecting:

Pounding, pounding, even biting Gigi was exhilarating, just as cooking was. It was more proof that the old Mavis was dead. The one who couldn’t defend herself from an eleven-year-old girl, let alone her husband. The one who couldn’t figure out or manage a simple meal, who relied on delis and drive-throughs, now created crepe-like delicacies without shopping everyday. (171)

Violence, death, and food become inseparable in Mavis’s mind, and she begins not to associate food with nourishment or healing, but with authority. Finally, her fears and misconceptions about food and the way to cook it are only relieved when Connie begins to teach her.

“Disconsolate”⁴

Like the women she eventually heals and nourishes, Connie too is associated with food. When she is first brought from Portugal to the Convent as a child, she learns how to maintain its kitchen and garden, and it is Connie “who [first] discovered the wild bush heavy with stinging-hot peppers and who cultivated them” (225). Before Connie’s discovery of the peppers, the only interaction between the Convent and Ruby were trips by the nuns into town to get supplies. As previously noted, the peppers allow the boundaries of Ruby and the Convent to be traversed and can be seen as an opportunity to transcend, either positively or negatively, the borders between inside and outside, self and other. The “discovery” and the “cultivation” of the peppers, however, not only allow visits from the townspeople, but also provide Deek with an excuse to drive to the Convent. Seeing Connie for the first time at the pharmacy in town, Deek eventually comes to the Convent where “all he wanted were some black peppers”, and he ultimately asks to borrow a basket to put them in and to inquire if he can “disturb” her later (228). His return that evening, without the basket, marks the beginning of their affair, and Connie’s love for him “after thirty celibate years took on an edible quality” (228). Their affair consists mostly of meeting on Friday afternoons beneath the same fig trees (231) that Dice speaks of to Gigi. The trees, however, have “no figs” for the duration of the affair, and throughout the period of her meetings with Deek, Connie becomes so preoccupied that she continuously forgets about gathering eggs and other household responsibilities (229, 232). The lack of figs and Connie’s forgetfulness concerning food

⁴ *Paradise* 318.

imply a famine rather than a feast, and the fact that her love is described as “edible” is ominous.

Steward soon discovers the affair, causing a fight, awkwardness, and disjointed meetings. Previously, “the regularity of their meetings, before his twin showed up, had soothed her hunger to a dull blade. Now irregularity knifed it” (236). The hunger Connie formerly felt sharpens and is described violently. It inspires her to invite Deacon to the Convent for their next meeting where she will “cram rosemary into pillowslips”, “rinse linen sheets in hot water steeped in cinnamon”, put “seckel pears crowded [into] a white bowl”, and “slake their thirst with prisoner wine” (237); however, after describing all of the culinary and sensory possibilities, Connie “bites his lip” (237), which frightens him and prevents his return. In the images of biting, consumption, and “edible love”, she appears as a cannibal. In a foreword to *Eating Their Words: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Cultural Identity*, Kilgour claims:

The figure of the cannibal dramatizes the danger of drawing boundaries too absolutely. But perhaps it equally reveals the peril of not drawing them at all, as the act of cannibalism is the place where self and other, love and aggression meet, where the body becomes symbolic, and at the same time, the human is reduced to mere matter. (viii)

Kilgour notes the cannibal’s ability to transcend borders and to alter one’s perception of the body. In terms of Connie and Deacon, the lip biting incident also illustrates Connie’s attempts to dissolve boundaries. Previously, all of their meetings take place outside or in a nearby ruined farmhouse, but Connie tries to both widen and narrow the parameters of their affair by inviting Deacon to the Convent. By trying to take command of the setting of their relationship, as well as what sustains it, Connie removes the authority Deacon believes he has obtained by choosing to buy and consume the

peppers and by retaining the basket in which they are given. Mae Henderson claims that borders “create the desire to transgress” (3). Because Connie tries to remove the borders between Ruby, the Convent, and the outlying land, as well as the boundaries between self and other, it seems as though Deacon is no longer willing to “transgress.” The removal of the borders is a reminder that rather than being “one” with Connie, he is married to Soane, lives in Ruby, and has created a pact with God, stipulating “unadulteried” blood. In an attempt to remove the boundaries between them, Connie has inadvertently succeeded in redefining them. Changing locations, biting his lip, and providing food, spices, and wine, are all also physical acts. The focus remains on the body, the spiritual is forgotten, and even if Deek had returned, their actions of incorporation would have remained incomplete.

Years later, as Deacon ponders Connie, he views her as:

An uncontrollable woman who had bitten his lip just to lap the blood it shed; a beautiful, golden-skinned, outside woman with moss-green eyes that tried to trap a man, close him up in a cellar room with liquor to enfeeble him so they could do carnal things, unnatural things in the dark; a Salome from whom he had escaped just in time or she would have had his head on a dinner plate. The ravenous, ground-fucking woman [...]. (279-280)

Deacon simultaneously notes Connie as “ravenous”, “uncontrollable”, “outside”, and “beautiful.” The ideas of her being “outside”, of trying to “trap” him in the cellar, and of consuming him, all illustrate Deacon’s fear and rejection of assimilation, and he tries to maintain strict boundaries between inside and outside, self and other. He considers both her lust and her hunger as unnatural, and the image of Connie as the Biblical seductress Salome, who uses her charms to obtain the head of John the Baptist on a platter, provides a contrast to the sacrificed and sacrificing St. Catherine of Siena.

Unlike St. Catherine, Connie's hunger projects beyond her own body and seeks to incorporate Deek. By the end of the novel, when the men invade the Convent in the hunt for the women, Deacon sees Connie for the first time in decades. He notes, "There is blood near her lips. It takes his breath away" (289). Whereas Connie has professed her hunger and has attempted to "bite", Deacon has repressed his appetite, and his behavior at the end of the novel expresses desires he has previously attributed solely to Connie. Deacon's reaction to Connie and the fact that he has projected some of his own desires onto her, echo part of Arens's argument in *The Man-Eating Myth*. Generally, Arens claims that cannibalism, as a regularly practiced ritual, is a fabrication with no credible eyewitness accounts, and Brown and Tuzin, despite their rejection of Arens's argument, agree that "the common attribution of cannibalism is a rhetorical device used ideologically by one group to assert its moral superiority over another" (3). Refusing to acknowledge his own desires and fears, Deacon has instead projected them onto Connie in an attempt to attain a "moral superiority", and his own "edible" tendencies are not realized until the end of the novel.

After the affair with Deacon is over, it is clear that Connie has ignored all other aspects of her appetite, including her literal and spiritual hunger, in her preoccupation with him. When he fails to return, Connie retreats further into herself:

While the light changed and the meals did too, the next few days were one long siege of sorrow, during which Consolata picked through the scraps of her gobble-gobble love. Romance stretched to the breaking point, exposing a simple mindless transfer. From Christ, to whom she gave total surrender and then swallowed the idea of His flesh, to a living man [...]. She simply bent the knees she had been so happy to open and said, "Dear Lord, I didn't want to eat him. I just wanted to go home." (240)

Connie's love is depicted almost as gluttonous, and it appears as bingeing without any attempts to purge. Guest depicts the idea of the "cannibal as consumer", and in the case of Connie, the cannibal is a "figure of excess rather than monstrosity" (7). Her actions illustrate Kilgour's earlier claim of the dangers inherent in a lack of boundaries, and Connie's love extends beyond herself in unreciprocated excess. Her love is likened to a complete "surrender" where she has sacrificed everything in order to achieve a Christ-like communion with Deacon. Discussing the act of Communion in the Catholic Church, Ward states:

The subject becomes a member of a community of other bodies, the Church, and a member of Christ's own body – *the* body which regulates the meaning and nature of all other bodies. This coming-into-relation through feeding makes food the focus for a highly complex set of transferences or exchanges. It relates food to signification itself. Communion makes possible communication. (201)

Ward recognizes the act of Communion as a ritual of food and cannibalism that allows the individual to become one with Christ, the Church, and with other members of the congregation. Connie's trysts with Deacon, which were beginning to become ritual through the regularity of the meetings on Fridays at noon, gradually start to become inconsistent. In an attempt to return the meetings to ritual, Connie prepares food, washes, and cleans. Deacon, however, refuses to participate, and Connie's actions result in separation rather than communion or communication. By transferring her attention from Christ to Deacon, Connie sacrifices the spiritual elements of her devotion and becomes consumed by the physical aspects of her love.

As time passes, Connie spends her years "subdued" (242). She "perfected the barbeque sauce that drove cattle-country people wild; quarreled with the chickens; [...]

and tended the garden” (242). Rather than focusing on any of her own appetites, Connie begins to attend to others. Her “penance”, however, involves a “sunshot [that] seared her right eye” (241), and Connie gradually starts to go blind. As her green eyes lose their color, she has a partial epiphany in the Convent garden:

Sweat began to pour from her neck, her hairline, like rain. So much it clouded the sunglasses she now wore. She removed the glasses to wipe the sweat from her eyes. Through that salty water she saw a shadow moving toward her. When it got close, it turned into a small woman. Consolata, overcome with dizziness, tried to hold on to a bean pole, failed and sank to the ground. (242-243)

When Connie awakens, Lone materializes as the shadowy “small woman.” She refuses to give Connie water, noting that she has already had ““too much of that””, and likens her experience to an orgasm (243). Connie’s solitary and extremely physical experience in the garden not only exacerbates her blindness but provides her with the ability to “step-in.” Stepping in is a talent Connie and Lone both share that enables them to prolong others’ lives and even bring them to life once they have already died. The act involves physical contact and a partial sacrificing of the self in order to save the other. Page maintains that “by stepping in to another person and spiritually pulling him or her back to life, Lone and Connie engage in acts of extreme self-projection, of ultimate empathy, of total transfer of the self to the other” (“Furrowing” 641). Stepping in allows Connie and Lone to bridge the gap between self and other, inside and outside, and even external and internal. Importantly, it is also an act of assimilation that does not involve food or sex, and by stepping in, Connie is able to eradicate boundaries and achieve what she cannot with Deacon: she is able to sacrifice her body while still retaining control of it. The act of stepping in simultaneously permits independence and free will alongside

community and spirituality. It is a realm between the spiritual and the earthly where Lone claims, ““You need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don’t separate God from His elements. Don’t [...] unbalance His world”” (244). Lone notes the “balance” that stepping in provides; however, Connie is reluctant to accept her gift, and it takes years before she can finally attain salvation.

Connie first uses her ability to step-in to restore life to Deacon and Soane’s son, Scout, after he is involved in a car accident (245), and the incident results in a lifelong friendship between the women. When Soane visits Connie in order to thank her, she brings “round sugar cookies” in a basket (246). Conversation, over shared cookies and coffee begins and the women “traded that basket between them for years” (247). Unlike the beginning of her relationship with Deacon, where peppers are singly consumed, a basket remains unreturned, and food causes fear, Connie and Soane’s friendship develops from the reciprocity of gift-giving, which includes both sugar cookies and stepping in. After Connie restores Scout, she then tries to prolong Mary Magna’s life. The Mother Superior eventually dies, however, and Connie feels “orphaned” and that God was “overgenerous” with the gift of stepping in (248):

Like giving satanic gifts to a drunken, ignorant, penniless woman living in darkness unable to rise from a cot to do something useful or die on it and rid the world of her stench. Gray-haired, her eyes drained of what eyes were made for, she imagined how she must appear. (248)

Connie steadily begins to decline after Deacon’s departure, and her condition worsens after Mary Magna’s death. She begins to drink, consuming “prisoner wine” in the cellar, welcoming each new girl to the Convent on a “wave of alcohol breath” (70). Eventually, once all the women have arrived at the Convent and after years of drinking,

a “grand weariness” overcomes her and she sleeps “herself into sobriety” (250). When she awakens, she is surrounded by her “winter-plagued garden” (251):

Tomato vines hung limp over fallen fruit, black and smashed in the dirt. Mustards were pale yellow with rot and inattention. A whole spill of melons caved in on themselves near heads of chrysanthemums stricken mud brown [...]. The corn scrabble in neatly harvested fields beyond looked forlorn. And the pepper bushes, held on to by the wrinkled fingers of their yield, were rigid with cold. (251)

The state of the once-abundant garden spurs Connie to action, and her experiences at the Convent come full circle. As the life drains from her, it drains from the plants she has discovered and cultivated, and it is clear that while she is malnourished, she has not lost her connection with any of her earthly “elements.” By first replacing Christ with Deacon and then by refusing to fully accept her gift of “in-sight”, Connie has denied her spirituality, and her “awakening” in the garden becomes both literal and metaphorical. Now, instead of rejecting her fate or her circumstances, Connie refuses to be overcome by them and, as Romero claims, she “begins to teach the other women at the Convent the importance of connecting the material to the spiritual, the body to the soul” (417).

Last Suppers

By the end of the novel, Connie not only teaches Mavis how to cook, but she teaches all of the women at the Convent how to nourish themselves. M. Harris debates whether “food [...] must nourish the collective mind before it can enter an empty stomach” or if “food must nourish the collective stomach before it can feed the collective mind” (15). While Harris decides on the latter, it appears as though Connie achieves both methods of nourishment. To initiate her intervention, Connie cooks for the women her own version of a Last Supper, which involves careful and considered

preparations that intertwine the individuals' stories of pain with the cooking process, and cooking, preparing, and sharing food become synonymous with healing. Not many days after Connie's elaborate meal, the women are hunted and persecuted by the men of Ruby before achieving a resurrected life after death. Holloway and Demetrakopoulos note, "When directed inwards, towards spiritual nourishment, a physical life bows to the potential of spiritual freedom – even when characters' lives themselves [...] must become the sacrificial agents of that freedom" (24). While the women are still unaware of the ensuing "hunt", Connie already begins to provide them with a spiritual as well as a physical nourishment, and the women eventually achieve a "spiritual freedom" that makes life, death, and the body all irrelevant.

As she meditates on the women in her home, "Consolata cleans, washes, and washes again two freshly killed hens" (252). She removes and boils their innards, stuffs their breasts, and bastes and roasts them. The meal is accompanied by potatoes, apples, and wine-soaked raisins, and Connie's preparations initially appear, much like Christine's in *Love*, as mere background. As they surround, punctuate, and separate each Convent woman's individual story of pain, the healing process begins when "the table is set; the food placed" (262). Brillat-Savarin claims that "To invite people to dine with us is to make ourselves responsible for their well-being for as long as they are under our roofs" (16). He combines notions of hospitality, health, and responsibility, and Connie has finally taken ownership of her gift and her role in the women's lives. She instructs the women, "'If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for'" (262). Her words imply a promise of sustenance, obedience, and fulfillment, and as Lupton claims,

“cooking [has become] a moral process” (2). Through Connie, the women are able to nourish themselves, and instead of continuing to articulate their pain through their bodies, they are able to release it. The women begin to share and draw their pain on the cellar floor of the Convent, and rather than trying to manipulate, dictate, or self-harm, the women learn to find peace with themselves and become a direct contrast to Ruby, which is articulated in greater detail in chapter three. Through their “dreaming sessions” of shared pain, Page maintains that they are able to “heal themselves, achieving individual harmony as they acquire communal harmony. They gain self and community [...]” (“Furrowing” 642). The Convent women are able to achieve both communal and individual transformations that, unlike the superficial or “too tight unity” of Ruby, liberates them.

Eventually, “with Consolata in charge, like a new and revised Reverend Mother, feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst, they altered. They had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the moving ones below” (265). Food regains its potential to be something positive, sustaining, and structured, and Connie enables the women to merge and nourish their mental and physical selves. Because of Consolata, food is elevated and related to ritual:

The women sleep, wake and sleep again with images of parrot, crystal seashells, and a singing woman who never spoke. At four in the morning, they wake to prepare for the day. One mixes dough while another lights the stove. Others gather vegetables for the noon meal, then set out the breakfast things. The bread, kneaded into mounds, is placed in baking tins to rise. (285)

Food preparation and consumption becomes an essential part of their day. Ward claims, “Rituals are, then, about the creation and control of experience. They perform a cultural

identity and a cultural ideology; they are a means of consolidating a community and articulating its value system” (196-197). If ritual “consolidates” a community, it implies that Connie has already managed to create one, and she has further begun to instill and profess its values. The notions of communion, communication, and food intertwined with ritual illustrates a vast difference between the Convent’s achievements of actual unity in comparison with Ruby and Haven’s depictions of a superficial unity based on fear, isolation, and rejection. Ultimately, the women are not only going through a cleansing process of eating and drinking “bloodless meals and water”, but they are also becoming united. Thomas claims that rituals “promote social harmony and individual and group confidence. This definition implies that ritual is a way of ordering the chaos of existence or a way of programming the individual within the society so that he or she does not fall victim to that chaos” (111). By implementing ritual, Connie is ridding the women of the chaotic, self-harming aspects of their lives and replacing those aspects with unity and harmony. While the women draw their individual bodily outlines on the cellar floor, they voice and share their pain, and their distinguishing physical traits become irrelevant. Readers do not know the shades of the women’s skin, all of the women’s heads are shaved, and even the illustration of their food preparation reflects both an anonymity and a unity. After Connie’s meals and after many additions to the drawings on the cellar floor, it begins to rain. The women go outside, “and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces” (283). They become “holy women dancing in the hot sweet rain” (283) and release more of their pain. The women have begun to undergo a cleansing, healing transformation or a rebirth, akin to a baptism. And, if, as Gubar claims, the “women have had to experience cultural scripts in their

lives by suffering them in their bodies” (251), they have equally been able to release their bodily pain through nourishment and communality: they gradually find peace, are no longer “haunted” by their pasts, and become “calmly themselves” (266).

The description of the Convent women’s “Last Supper” and eventual food-healing is different from the men of Ruby’s final meal in which they partake before they go on the novel’s opening and closing “hunt”:

The men had just begun to blow in their cups when the rain started. After a few swallows they joined Sargeant in the yard to move sacks and cover equipment and tarpaulin. When they returned, drenched, to the shed, they found themselves suddenly lighthearted and hungry. Sargeant suggested beefsteaks and went in his house to get what was needed to feed the men. Priscilla, his wife, heard him and offered to help, but he sent her back to bed, firmly. The scented rainfall drummed. The atmosphere in the shed was braced, companionable, as the men ate thick steaks prepared the old-fashioned way, fried in a piping hot skillet. (282)

The Convent women gather, rather than hunt food and no longer eat meat, and while Connie’s elaborate cooking preparations span pages and punctuate the description and release of pain, the cooking of the steaks is straightforward and constricted, and the drinking of the coffee is rushed and mechanical, not savored. For the men, eating is spur-of-the-moment, based purely on physical hunger and is not planned. Connie, as illustrated through the readying of the food, the drawings on the cellar floor, and the rain dancing, is preparing a perpetual, rather than a temporary nurturance whereas the men are simply providing fuel for the ensuing “hunt.” Fiddes states in *Meat: A Natural Symbol* that meat “tangibly represents human control of the natural world. Consuming the muscle flesh of other highly evolved animals is a potent symbol of our supreme power” (2). Not only, then, are the men providing fuel for the “hunt”, but by eating meat, they are illustrating desires to dominate and control rather than assimilate or bond.

C. Adams adds to Fiddes's argument, claiming that meat not only signifies power, but that it relates to "virility" (26) and that it "reinforces a hierarchy of race, class, and sex" (30). Based on Fiddes's and Adams's comments, as well as the portrayal of the men's preparations, the meat-eating reemphasizes Ruby's racist, sexist, and elitist tendencies. Their food choice reflects their mentality, and Fiddes's further claim that "bloodshed is central to meat's value" (65) is a reminder of the violence and death inherent in consuming meat. It even implies, because of the word "value", the desirability of bloodshed. The men's final meal, then, despite their "companionable" preparations, has a "braced" and foreboding air, and as Sargeant sends his wife Priscilla "firmly" back to bed, readers cannot help but be reminded of the danger and violence about to descend on the Convent women.

Before the hunt, however, the women ask Connie to tell stories about the mysterious, god-like figure of Piedade:

"We sat on the sidewalk. She bathed me in emerald water. Her voice made proud women weep in the streets [...], and the country's greatest chefs begged us to eat their food [...]. At night she took the stars out of her hair and wrapped me in its wool. Her breath smelled of pineapple and cashews...." (284-285)

Connie's stories about Piedade are a combination of mystery, memory, and myth. According to Stanford, "storytelling becomes another way to feed" (137), and Connie appears to be covering all aspects of physical, spiritual, and emotional nourishment, providing for the women all that their lives lacked. Through stories of Piedade, food becomes important and palpable, as seen through the begging of the chefs. At the same time, it becomes something soothing, fresh, and intangible, as in the last line of the segment. The stories of Piedade, combined with Connie's other methods of food use,

illustrate, as Heller and Moran claim, “the reclamation of the female body and female appetites” (31). On their way to being free of pain and eating disorders, the Convent women have begun to reclaim themselves. As Chernin believes, they are slowly beginning to “glimpse the possibility of transforming an obsession with food into an authentic ritual of transformation” (xiv), and the women are not far from experiencing an epiphanical salvation.

Eventually, when the men of Ruby do “hunt” them, knocking down the door and entering through the kitchen, the Convent women fight back, breaking “the frame of Catherine of Siena” over someone’s head and also throwing a pot full of hot stock over the face of another (286). Mitchie notes a variety of the implications of “frames”, and states that they “can be unjust accusations [...], ways of keeping women ‘in their place’, protection from a hostile world, or definitions of a space from which women can begin to assert their power” (9). The frame of St. Catherine of Siena’s picture can be said to encompass all of Mitchie’s definitions. Initially, St. Catherine is judged and assessed by any passerby, including Gigi. The picture is also “hidden” in the Convent, away from the external world, and it can alternatively be seen as a confined space from which Catherine can demonstrate the sacrifice of her body. The fact that it is the frame that breaks and not the canvas of St. Catherine additionally indicates a sense of liberation and freedom; Catherine is no longer being stereotyped, consumed, or assessed, and there are no longer any boundaries. According to Levi-Strauss, the image of the pot of boiling stock can also be viewed as liberating, and he claims, “It is thought that if the pot boiling were to overflow even a little bit, all the animals of the species being cooked would migrate, and the hunter would catch nothing more. Does not world folklore offer

innumerable examples of the cauldron of immortality?” (31-32). Levi-Strauss further maintains “that a poorly conducted boiling, during which the cauldron overflowed, would bring the inverse punishment, flight of the quarry, which the huntsman would no longer succeed in overtaking” (33). Levi-Strauss references a Native American myth from the Great Lakes region. The myth notes that when one begins to boil water in order to cook the meat that has been hunted, it is imperative not to spill it. If the water spills, then all of the animals of the hunted species not only return to life and escape the hunters, but they, in turn, become the hunters. In *Paradise*, after throwing the boiling stock at Menus, who is one of the hunters, the women escape the Convent, which formerly housed Native American girls, and the men soon come to understand that “the women are not hiding. They are loose” (287). The townspeople call Roger Best, Pat’s father and the owner of an ambulance/ hearse, to go to the Convent. He has been told that “Three women were down in the grass [...]. One in the kitchen. Another across the hall. He searched everywhere. [...] No bodies. Nothing. Even the Cadillac was gone” (292). The “hunt” has failed, and the women are not simply “loose” but have disappeared. Before Roger arrives at the Convent, however, Lone volunteers to “stay with the bodies” and comments that ““a lot of work”” remains to be done (292), and Lone completes the process of salvation that Connie has begun. Presumably stepping in after everyone else departs, Lone aids the women in achieving the “cosmic totality” (31) stated in Levi-Strauss’s myth. The women were born, suffered, fed, hunted, and finally brought again to life.

The mysterious, anonymous, and unanimous disappearance of the women after the hunt is then followed by descriptions of each individual woman’s transformation.

Gigi's liberation culminates in an interaction with her father. She approaches her father amongst his "Kentucky Fried Chicken" and the thought that "lunchtime was special" (309). Dressed in army fatigues, she is reunited, temporarily, with both her father and the locket he gave her as a child (265, 310). Food is present in the interaction and yet Gigi is detached from it. Unlike her appearance at the beginning of the novel, food does not confuse or influence her. Instead, she appears in a state of active, yet relaxed readiness. Seneca too experiences a transformation, and she unknowingly encounters her mother, Jean. When Jean first sees her, Seneca is having fresh, accidental cuts cleaned by a friend with a bottle of beer, and Jean is only able to recognize her daughter because of Seneca's "chocolate eyes" (316). Seneca's cuts are being cleansed by another, she no longer intentionally self-harms, and she is no longer alone. As well as Gigi and Seneca, Pallas also is temporarily in the presence of one of her parents, and she approaches her mother's house carrying a sword and a baby. Dee Dee, her mother, cannot speak, is sipping a margarita, and describes the baby's legs as "round as doughnuts" (311). Pallas walks past her mother and removes a pair of Hauraches, which are the only remnant of her, from the house. Like Gigi, Pallas is no longer preoccupied with food, and she too appears in a state of relaxed readiness. Both women appear prepared for a battle, which unites several concepts in the novel: it brings to mind Soane's and Lone's ideas of the work that remains after a hunt and after death, and it further completes Levi-Strauss's myth of the hunted becoming the hunters. Pallas, Seneca, and Gigi all encounter one of their parents, and the absence of any harmful affects of food previously associated with each woman is apparent. The Convent

women are detached and determined, and they are no longer haunted by painful memories. In other words, the women are no longer hungry.

Once again, however, Mavis is more associated with food than the other women. She arrives at a restaurant and encounters her daughter Sal, who she formerly believed was plotting against her. Mavis orders, “Orange juice, double grits and two eggs over medium” (313) from the waitress and refuses her offer of different meats. A conversation then ensues between Mavis and Sal:

“That’s what I like about this place. They let you choose [...].”

“Mom! I don’t want to talk about food.” Sally felt as though her mother was sliding away [...].”

“Well, you never did have much of an appetite.” [...]

The waitress arrived and neatly arranged the plates. Mavis salted her grits and swirled the pat of butter on top. She sipped her orange juice and said, “Ooo. Fresh.” (313-314)

As Sal proceeds to describe her abusive encounters with her father, Mavis insists she try the orange juice. By the end of the segment, “Sally picked up a fork, slipped it into her mother’s plate, scooping up a buttery dollop of grits. When the fork was in her mouth, their eyes met. Sally felt the nicest thing then. Something long and deep and slow and bright” (314). By the end of the novel, Mavis knows exactly what to do with food.

Unlike earlier incidents with Billy James and Birdie, Sal does not “play” in her mother’s food, nor does Mavis need to turn to her mother’s plate for sustenance. She is now not only able to feed herself, but she is also finally able to nourish one of her children. More than any of her previous attempts at the Convent, she is able to emulate Connie and her mother in their abilities to feed, cook, and nourish. Like Connie, Mavis is further able to provide a sense of mental well-being in her daughter. Sal’s emotions, which initially seem rushed and as though her connection with her mother is “sliding away”, become

fulfilling and calm when she eats from her mother's well-ordered and well-prepared plate. Finally, food is no longer rotting or complicated for Mavis, but "fresh" and healing. In their final moments in the novel, the Convent women are able to overcome their eating "disorders" and can now concentrate on "the endless work they were meant to do" (318).

After the women's communal and individual transformations and salvation, the novel ends with images of Connie and Piedade:

In ocean hush a woman black as firewood is singing. Next to her is a younger woman whose head rests on the singing woman's lap. Ruined fingers troll tea brown hair. All the colors of seashells – wheat, roses, pearls – fuse in the younger woman's face. Her emerald eyes adore the black face framed in cerulean blue. Around them on the beach, sea trash gleams. Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal. A small dead radio plays the quiet surf.

There is nothing to beat this solace which is what Piedade's song is about, although the words evoke memories neither one has ever had: of reaching age in the company of the other; of speech shared and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home – the ease of coming back to love begun.

When the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for sometime. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise. (318)

The final paragraphs of *Paradise* encapsulate the changes that Connie enables in Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Mavis. The "discarded bottle caps", from the bottle of beer used to cleanse Seneca's wounds lie "near a broken sandal", which is possibly one of Pallas's Huaraches, and the radio that was present when Mavis first came upon Gigi at the Convent and that accompanied Gigi throughout her encounter with her father is "dead." The scene hints at a more meaningful life after death that is cleansed of pain and hunger,

and rather than providing an ending to the narrative of Haven, Ruby, and the Convent, the passage feels as though the story is about to begin.

Connie's moments with Piedade at the end of the novel illustrate both a transcendental salvation and an embracing of earthly things. Sight, sound, scent, touch, and taste combine to offer an image of being beyond earthly influences, while at the same time participating in them. The passage also indicates a perpetual striving towards a soothing peacefulness, and ideas of rest and work become united. Piedade truly encompasses Lone's injunction not to "separate God from His elements", and she appears spiritually as myth and god and physically as both woman and Portuguese island. Through her own salvation, which is Hebrew for "coming home", it seems that Connie has finally found the "home" and the peace for which she was looking, first in Mary Magna, the Convent, and in Deacon. Morrison defines "home" as "a site clear of racist detritus; a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent. [...She] wants to imagine not the threat of that freedom, or its tentative panting fragility, but the concrete thrill of borderlessness" (qtd. in Benedix 102). As a woman "black as firewood" sings and "trolls tea brown hair", as ships "head to port", as people are simultaneously "lost and saved", "rested" and "shouldering endless work", it seems that Connie has come home to a borderless salvation that extends beyond race, gender, and food.

Transition Two

In an interview with Thomas LeClair, Morrison states, “‘I think long and carefully about what my novels ought to do. [...] They ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those that are not; they ought to give nourishment’” (121). The previous chapter illustrated and expanded upon Morrison’s concepts of “nourishment” in *Paradise*, showing how characters’ eating habits progress from self-harm to salvation. As the Convent women learn how to feed themselves, they simultaneously purge the detrimental parts of their pasts through food sharing rituals, “dreaming” sessions, and by drawing their pain on the cellar floor. They ultimately find salvation as individuals and as a community by recognizing, accepting, and expelling their pain, hunger, and pasts. In the following chapter, characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz* also must face “those things in the past that are useful and those that are not.” Unlike the Convent women, however, protagonists in the next chapter do not manage to successfully overcome their pasts. Rather than achieving a balance between body, mind, and spirit like the women in *Paradise*, characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz* struggle to maintain a balance between past, present, and future.

The focus in *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*, on telling stories from generation to generation, is not unlike Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*. In *Corregidora*, Ursa is the mixed race fourth generation descendent of a deceased white Portuguese slaveholder, who rapes her great-grandmother. He then has sexual relations with her grandmother, who is also his daughter, and Ursa’s mother is both Corregidora’s daughter and granddaughter. From childhood, Ursa’s great-grandmother tells her that the slaveholders:

“Didn’t want to leave no evidence of what they done – so it couldn’t be held against them. And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That’s why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn’t be no evidence to hold up against them.” (14)

The “evidence” Ursa’s great-grandmother proposes to leave is generations of children.

Ursa’s great-grandmother and grandmother already retell stories ceaselessly to

themselves, to Ursa’s mother, and to Ursa. Even the language quoted above illustrates

repetition within repetition, as they tell “*the same stories over and over again*” (11).

Ursa is encouraged to have children so that she too can “pass it down like that from

generation to generation [to] never forget” (9). At the beginning of *Corregidora*,

however, Ursa miscarries after falling down a flight of steps. She becomes barren, is

unable to continue the trend of her forebears, and is haunted both by the stories from her

childhood as well as the fact that she cannot reproduce. Jones, like Morrison, questions

the types of legacies that are passed from one generation to the next and illustrates how

they can lead to both a literal and a metaphorical sterility in the present.

The following chapter illustrates the effects of the past on characters in *Song of*

Solomon and *Jazz* and begins with an introduction depicting shrinking and infertile

generations in *Paradise*, where characters are told to proliferate in order to keep the past

alive. As protagonists become immersed in stories from their own and their ancestral

pasts, Morrison illustrates the ways in which such stories can be haunting. Characters in

all three novels are so consumed by ignorance or knowledge of their histories that they

are paralyzed in the present, and their futures become questionable. In *Song of Solomon*,

characters are faced with histories of abandonment and violent births that not only result

in a lack of reproduction in the present but also create false epiphanies. In *Jazz*, protagonists inherit insubstantial pasts where the gaps in the stories they are told consume them. As characters attempt to imitate the fragments of the stories they hear, they too fail to function in the present. Through depictions of infertility, Morrison questions what kinds of epiphanies or reconciliations are truly possible for characters who are haunted by their pasts, paralyzed in the present, and cannot plan for a future.

The Sterility of the Future

“It was not a story to pass on.”

Toni Morrison
Beloved 274

Together they read like a chant: PEACE 1895 – 1921, PEACE 1890 – 1923, PEACE 1910 – 1940, PEACE 1892 – 1959.

They were not dead people. They were words. Not even words. Wishes, longings. (*Sula* 171)

The headstones in *Sula* do not simply illustrate individual deaths but the deaths of generations of “PEACES,” and “wishes” and “longings” refer not only to the desire for a restful “peace” but to the desire for the potential of life and the promise of its perpetuation. By the end of *Sula*, the aged Eva is the only Peace still alive in the Bottom. Her granddaughter Sula perishes from fever and illness, her daughter Hannah has been consumed by a fire, she murders her son Plum, and readers are told that her barely-mentioned daughter Pearl has also died. Even the orphaned deweys mentioned in chapter one, who Eva brings into her home, names, and dominates, are dead. The once powerful matriarch no longer has anyone to preside over and true to her earlier words, Eva cannot “birth” her children “twice” (71). In all of Morrison’s novels lost generations and ideas of death pervade characters’ lives and at times result in questionable epiphanies. Stories of abandonment, especially in *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*, also cause characters to become so consumed by the past that they frequently cannot function in the present, are unable to create a future, and become enmeshed in what Morrison terms a “static rather than a living history” (“Round Table” 717). They

cannot progress and either reject reproduction or become sterile, and in many of Morrison's novels, the size of families is shown to decrease or, in some cases, family lines come to a complete end. In an essay on birth control and the black revolution of the 1960s, Cade Bambara claims:

You don't prepare yourself for the raising of super-people by being vulnerable – chance fertilization, chance support, chance tomorrow – nor by being celibate until you stumble across the right stock to breed with. You prepare yourself by being healthy and confident, by having options to give you confidence, by getting yourself together [...], by being committed to the new consciousness, by being intellectually and spiritually and financially self-sufficient to do the right thing. You prepare yourself by being in control of yourself. (164)

Cade Bambara proposes personal control as a way out of racial discrimination and repression. In Morrison's novels, as characters are raped, abused, and aborted, reproduction is anything but planned, and characters' "options" remain limited. As it seems difficult for Morrison's characters to live "healthily" in the present, it is all too easy to envision the vulnerability of a "chance tomorrow." Discussing abortion and birth control, Angela Davis claims, "When black women resort to abortions in such large numbers, the stories they tell are not so much about the desire to be free of their pregnancy, but rather about the miserable social conditions which dissuade them from bringing new lives into the world" (204). Davis maintains that reproduction or its lack is a reflection of social and living conditions, that it is not necessarily about choice, and that perhaps society has not yet offered the option of "control." If, then, the perpetuation of life is frequently portrayed as a burden in Morrison's novels and is presented alongside a past of slavery, repression, and malnourishment which some protagonists cannot seem to overcome, then it appears as though Morrison is questioning what kind

of reconciliation is possible for her characters. Even if her protagonists manage to merge the past with the present, overcome pain, and nourish themselves, what kind of future is available to them in a society that does not, as Morrison claims, “permit harmony?” (*Margin* 56)

As well as the aforementioned *Sula*, *Tar Baby* and the remainder of Morrison’s novels also describe diminishing or alienated generations:

Valerian’s grandmother had four sons, each of whom had married a woman who had only girls. Except Valerian’s mother who delivered one girl and one boy, who was the future of the family. When his father died and Valerian was seven, the uncles gathered to steady everybody and to take over the education of their dead brother’s son [...]. (*Tar Baby* 47)

Valerian becomes the sole heir to his family’s candy company, only to engage in an initial “nine-year childless marriage to a woman who disliked him” (49) before marrying his second wife Margaret. To the “relief” (50) of the uncles, Margaret soon has a son Michael whose “behind”, however, she proceeds to “cut up”, “burn”, and “stick pins in” (209). Valerian and Margaret do not have another child, and Michael distances himself from them, refusing their company and the business. The novel’s other middle aged couple, Sydney and Ondine, remain childless and raise their niece Jadine, who has no children. In *Love* Mr. Cosey is dead from the beginning of the novel as is his only son, and his granddaughter Christine, who has “always been unsentimental about abortions, considering them one less link in the holding chain” (164), ultimately has seven of them. Cosey’s child-bride Heed believes she is pregnant but has no “menses for eleven months and would have had none for eleven more” if L had not “slapped” her and told her that her ““oven [was] cold”” (174). Both Christine and Heed remain childless throughout the novel. In *The Bluest Eye*, after raping his daughter, Cholly eventually dies and Pecola’s

resulting baby “comes too soon” and dies as well (162). All three novels illustrate either inabilities to reproduce, desires for sterility, or the end of a family line. Morrison’s novels are also filled with orphans, which are usually the result of intentional abandonment or death. In *Tar Baby*, Jadine’s parents die, as does Sula’s mother in *Sula*. In *Paradise*, Mavis inadvertently kills two of her children and leaves the survivors, and other characters such as Lone, Connie, and Seneca are orphaned and abandoned. In *Love*, Christine and Junior are essentially orphans, as are Violet, Joe and Dorcas in *Jazz* and Macon, Pilate, Guitar, and Freddie in *Song of Solomon*. In *Beloved*, however, orphan status is inflicted by slavery and a dominant white culture. Sethe’s mother drowns or discards all of the babies forced on her by rape or abuse and keeps only Sethe, her one child conceived by choice. Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law, loses all of her children, including Sethe’s husband Halle, to slavery and its repercussions, and eventually Sethe too loses most of her children. She kills her own unnamed “crawling already? baby” rather than witness her children re-enslaved, and soon afterwards, her sons Howard and Buglar flee their mother’s house instead of having to face “the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time” (3). By the end of the novel, Denver is the only child who remains.

In “The Pain of Being Black”, Morrison states, ““Three hundred years [of slavery] – think about that. Now, that’s not a war, that’s generation after generation. And they were expendable. True, they had the status of good horses, and nobody wanted to kill their stock. And, of course, they had the advantage of reproducing without cost”” (n.p.). Morrison’s statement indicates conflicting perceptions of reproduction for African Americans. During slavery, reproduction was reduced to

“breeding” and supplementing “stock”, and there were mixed views of African American life as being expendable, in terms of the individual human, and as being valuable, in terms of the owned object. Morrison’s novels illustrate the persistence of mixed perceptions of reproduction, and fertility is viewed as both something valuable and as something unwanted. For many of Morrison’s characters, fertility becomes intertwined with history and stories from the past, and as characters in *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon* struggle to cope with inheritances of abandonment, the present becomes sterile and the future remains questionable. Perhaps, as the narrator in *Beloved* claims, these are not stories to “pass on” simply because there is no one to whom they can be passed.

Paradise’s “Scattered” Generations: An Introduction

Ruby is already dead, and *Paradise* opens and closes, not only with peppers, hunting, and the deaths of the Convent women, but with the deaths of two members of the Founding Families. “Ruby”, the title of the novel’s opening chapter, is also the name of Steward and Deacon’s sister, after whom they christen the town. The novel’s final chapter, “Save-Marie”, is named after one of Jeff and Sweetie Fleetwood’s children, who becomes the first resident of Ruby to die within it. In an effort to prevent death, Deacon and Steward make a “pact” with God stipulating “unadulterated and unadulteried” bloodlines in exchange for “immortality” within Ruby (217) while they simultaneously attempt to obey the “law of continuance and multiplication” inherited from the Founding Fathers (279). While Marcus Garvey believes that “the white man of America will not [...] assimilate the Negro, because in so doing, he feels that he will be committing racial suicide”, Garvey himself supports a “pure black race” (29). The Founders’ sentiments echo Garvey’s as he claims:

Slavery brought upon us the curse of many colors within the race, but that is no reason why we ourselves should perpetuate the evil [...]. We should now set out to create a race type and standard of our own which could not, in the future, be stigmatized by bastardy, but could be recognized and respected as the true race type. (29-30)

Garvey advocates “pure bloodlines” and views mixed race as “bastardy.” He fears that whites plot the “extinction of the Negro in America” (37) and that they are “making a herculean struggle to become the only surviving race” (48), and his solution, much like the Founders’, is to maintain a “race type” and to multiply. Deacon, Steward, and the Founding Fathers fail, though, as death and diminishing generations, even amongst the “pure” 8-locks, occur not just in the beginning and ending chapters but throughout the novel. As ancestral stories usurp the present, the inhabitants of Ruby seem to lose their futures.

Paradise is replete with the burden of genealogies, family histories, and ancestral legacies that lead to a sense of stagnation in the present:⁵

Over and over with the least provocation, they [the inhabitants of Ruby] pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and great-grands; their fathers and mothers. Dangerous confrontations, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to endurance, wit, skill, and strength. Tales of luck and outrage. But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut-up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by. As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates. (161)

The residents of Ruby repetitively and endlessly “pass on” stories about their ancestors while simultaneously remaining silent about their own lives. They are obsessed with

⁵ Morrison’s indebtedness to Faulkner in the following section is apparent. Amongst other articles, Joseph Brown in “To Cheer the Weary Traveler”, Peter Ramos in “Beyond Silence and Realism”, Jennie J. Joiner in “The Slow Burn of Masculinity”, and David Cowart in “Faulkner and Joyce in Morrison” all draw out comparisons between the two authors. Patricia McKee does likewise in her book length study, *Producing American Races*.

their inheritance, and the intense focus on the past leaves them bereft of a meaningful present and even makes the future questionable. Newcomers, such as Reverend Misner, are unable to communicate with them about their present lives and problems, and Pat Best, the schoolteacher who is compiling a history of the town and whose own mother and sister die in childbirth (198), also reflects on the information she collects:

Stories about these fragments [of lesser known families], which made up some fifty more, surfaced in the writing compositions of Pat's students, the gossip and recollections at picnics, church dinners, and woman talk over chores and preparation. [...] These bits of tales emerged like sparks lighting the absences that hovered over their childhoods and the shadows that dimmed their maturity. Anecdotes marked the spaces that had sat with them at campfires. (188-189)

Ruby has stagnated, and even the townspeople's children, in both Pat's and Misner's observations, are valued not for themselves, but in terms of their abilities to perpetuate or "duplicate" the past. As Reverend Misner previously notes, the residents of Ruby had "no stories to tell of themselves", and the past is shown to possess both the ability to inspire and to paralyze. Progress is halted, and the townspeople simultaneously celebrate the achievements of the past while mourning the loss of their ancestors. To the inhabitants of Ruby, the past has become an addiction where they mistakenly believe that the solution to, or mask for, their emptiness lies in the temporary and vicarious "sparks" that are fuelled by the very stories that cripple them. The sense of loss then becomes overwhelming and causes the "shadows" and "absences" of their ancestors to blight the present. Rather than emulating the innovations and independence of their ancestors, residents instead begin to inherit their fears and prejudices.

The past then gradually usurps the present until even reproduction is affected. Ruby's self-imposed and inherited isolation, reflected in their "pact" with God, in the

Disallowing, and in their treatment of “outsiders”, gradually escalates into an inability to interact with younger generations, each other, and even their spouses. Isolation, combined with greed and an obsession with the past, results in the inability of Steward and Deacon, who are essentially the “duplicates” of their grandfather Coffee and his twin Tea, to successfully reproduce. Deacon and Soane’s relationship, as well as Steward and Dovey’s, which are more fully articulated in chapter two, reflect an “absence” of children, and they can only live vicariously through stories of their ancestors’ fertility. Deacon and Soane temporarily continue the trend of the Morgans and have twin sons Easter and Scout; however, after Deacon begins to have an affair with Connie, causing Soane to feign the desire for an abortion (240), she ironically miscarries their third child, and it seems the “pact” has been broken. They then eventually lose Easter and Scout in the Vietnam War, and Deacon feels “burdened with the loss of all sons. Since his twin had no children the Morgans had arrived at the end of the line” (113).

Steward and his wife Dovey suffer a series of miscarriages (96), and Steward eventually learns that “neither could ever have children” (82). Later, Steward is interviewed by Pat, who notes “these later Morgans were not as prolific as earlier ones” (191). Steward becomes:

Insulted like, because he himself wasn’t a papa or a daddy, big or otherwise. Because the Morgan line was crop feeble. One of Zechariah’s (Big Papa’s) sons, Rector, had seven children with his wife, Beck, but only four survived: Elder, the twins Deacon and Steward, and K.D.’s mother, Ruby. Elder died leaving his wife, Susannah (Smith) Morgan, with six children – all of whom moved from Haven to northern states. Zechariah would have hated that. Moving would have been “scattering” to him. And he was right, for sure enough, from then on the fertility shriveled, even while the bounty multiplied. (192-193)

Fertility is linked to the ability to nourish, and “crop feeble” encompasses literal and metaphorical meanings and implies both shortage and famine. The past overshadows the present, dead bodies are revered over live ones, and greed usurps fertility. Higgs notes vaguely that “once many black women had extremely large families – that is, ten or more children. Over time, this changed as small families and childlessness became common” (17). While Higgs notes a steady decrease in fertility in African Americans after the Civil War, he only offers poverty as a reason. In *Paradise*, however, it appears that material gains negate fertility, and the wealthier the inhabitants of Ruby become, the fewer children they have. Childbearing, then, encompasses the pacts that are made with God, which force characters to choose between different types of sustenance and perpetuation. In addition to fertility’s relationship to nourishment and wealth, Penningroth claims that “Unlike American historians, who agree that slavery was defined in terms of property rights and designed to produce commodities, most African historians agree that slavery was defined as an absence of kin” (8). The efforts of the Old Founders to multiply and to prevent their families from “scattering” can be viewed as a rejection of slavery, but regardless whether slavery is more aptly defined by ideas of ownership or kin, many in Ruby have fallen prey to both descriptions. As the Morgans place ever-increasing emphasis on wealth, becoming enslaved to the consumerist, white culture they claim to have rejected, they simultaneously begin to lose their “kin”, and their priorities shift from family to money. Overall, Ruby’s inhabitants are cursed by “scattering” and the past, generations continually decrease, and the injunction to proliferate ironically results in stunted growth.

The residents of Ruby truly seem in danger of having no one to “pass on” their fabled history to, and the Morgans are not the only “crop feeble” family. Before the annual school Nativity play analyzed in chapter two, Nathan Dupres, who is “believed to be the oldest man in Ruby,” (204) gives a speech:

“You all know my babies – all of them – was took by a tornado in 1922. Me and Mirth found them in a stranger’s wheat field. But I never regretted coming here. Never. There is honey in this land sweeter than any I know of, and I have cut cane in places where even the dirt tasted like sugar [...]. But there’s a sadness in me now [...]. This parch in my throat [...]. When I run my mind over it, all I can come up with is a dream I had a while back [...]. Was an Indian come up to me in a bean row [...]. The vines were green, tender [...]. Then he told me too bad the water was bad; said there was plenty of it but it was foul. I said, But look here, look at all the flowers. Look like a top crop to me. He said, The tallest cotton don’t yield the best crop [...].” (204-205)

Nathan too represents the end of a lineage, all of his children are dead, and his dream combines a legacy of loss with malnourishment. In the dream, Ruby initially appears to be functional and fertile; however, Nathan’s dead children, his thirst, and the Indian’s warning of “bad water” all indicate that the health of Ruby, in terms of its citizens and its land, is merely superficial. The statement that “the tallest cotton don’t yield the best crop” further illustrates a diminishing of population and values, and the “foul” water and thirst imply both that something is toxic and that a basic need is not being met. Pinkney claims:

They [black Americans] have been relegated to a harsh environment not unlike that of people in the so-called developing nations of the world. [...] For example [...] their infant mortality rate is especially high (compared to other Americans), and their life expectancy is low. They continue to die at a disproportionately high rate from diseases that can easily be controlled by modern medical techniques. (57)

Pinkney's statement likens the living conditions of blacks residing in America in the middle of the twentieth century to those of developing nations. In terms of *Paradise* and Nathan's dream, Pinkney's comment has multiple implications. While the Old and New Founders attempt to distance themselves from the conditions white society has imposed on them, it seems that they have simultaneously "relegated" themselves to a similar or worse living situation. Despite their pacts with God, they are vulnerable to the same fatalities that plagued them outside of Ruby. In escaping from subjugation, they have not only become the oppressors of the Convent women, but they have oppressed themselves.

Nathan's dream unites the decline in population and the overall lack of fertility in Ruby with concepts of literal growth, sustenance, and health, and ironically, despite there being "honey in this land sweeter" than anywhere else Nathan has been, his children have been uprooted in death and placed in "a stranger's wheat field." The mention of a stranger's wheat field is also a foreshadowing of a future event. A white family passing through town momentarily stops at Anna Flood's general store for supplies (121). They ultimately never escape the town, driving into a blizzard where they freeze to death, lost and isolated in one of Ruby's wheat fields (298). The toxicity of the town is made doubly apparent, as the provisions from Anna's store gives no sustenance, and Ruby's wheat fields are never described as providing food. Instead even in death, Nathan's children "scatter" to other, more palatable fields, and Ruby's own farmland becomes the setting for familial death and decay. At the end of his speech Nathan claims, "'It [the dream] shows the strength of our crop if we understand it. But it can break us if we don't. And bloody us too. May God bless the pure and holy and may

nothing keep us apart from each other [...]" (205). Knowing the "strength" of the crop implies a need to understand what they are producing as well as where they have come from, and Nathan's overall conclusion is paralleled in the conversation Pat and Reverend Misner have immediately afterwards. Misner warns Pat, "'If you cut yourself off from the roots, you'll wither'", to which Pat responds, "'Roots that ignore the branches turn to termite dust'" (209). Pat and Misner's conversation, combined with Nathan's dream, represents one of Ruby's escalating problems; not only are generations "withering" and dying, but there is an inability to communicate or to maintain a balance between them. Sterility is reflected everywhere: in the town's literal inability to grow crops, in its inability to reproduce, and in its inability to promote the past while still providing a livable present and future.

Nathan's dream and its implications of Ruby's sterility are reflected individually in Sweetie and Arnette Fleetwood. After giving birth to four children, all of whom are ill, Sweetie turns their "nursery" into a "hospital ward" (58). Eventually, "laughing at jokes no one made" (83) and fearing she is no longer capable of "watching" her children, Sweetie leaves "her house and step[s] into a street she had not entered in six years" (125). She stumbles through a blizzard where Seneca, one of the Convent girls, finds her. Since Sweetie is able to march "unbowed through the cutting wind", she is convinced of her own "state of grace" on the road to the Convent, and the cold seemingly does not affect her (129). Once inside, the Convent women attempt to help Sweetie, but "nothing they offered her would she eat or drink" (129). Rejecting all food, drink, and medication from the women, Sweetie insists on leaving the Convent. As Anna retrieves her, Sweetie states, "'Turn up the heater. I'm cold. How come I'm so

cold?” (130). Sweetie remains unable to reconcile her mind and body with her experiences, and she is the epitome of the “crops” in Nathan’s dream. On the surface, she appears righteous, whole, fertile, and literally and figuratively upstanding, but her “state of grace” remains temporary as she refuses all intervention and instead prefers to maintain the prejudices of the town, claiming the Convent women “tried their best to poison her” (275). Despite feeling compelled to walk miles down a deserted road in the middle of winter, ultimately towards the potential for both sustenance and salvation, Sweetie chooses instead to revert to the familiarity of the past where prejudice, isolation, and malnourishment reign unchecked. When she returns to the town, she cannot reconcile her mind with her body or with what her body has produced, which includes sensations of being cold as well as unhealthy children. She then loses the first of her children, and just as Save-Marie is unable to be saved, Sweetie too “disallows” herself any salvation.

Like Sweetie, Arnette also goes to the Convent in search of help and then refuses it. As a teenager, Arnette dates Steward and Deacon’s nephew K.D. and accidentally becomes pregnant. Arnette and K.D. then have verbal, physical, and public fights, and K.D. begins to sleep with Gigi. Later, when a pregnant Arnette arrives at the Convent for help, “she was not anxious [...] but revolted by the work of her womb. A revulsion so severe it cut mind from body and saw its flesh-producing flesh as foreign, rebellious, unnatural, diseased” (249). Just as Ruby is isolated from the outside world and as its generations are isolated from each other, Arnette feels separate from her body. The Founders’ children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren have become so averse to outsiders that they even begin to view the work of their own bodies as unwanted and

unknown. However, not only has Arnette's body become "foreign", but so has her mind. She has become so severely isolated from both that she is no longer in possession of either, and her very person becomes something outside, foreign, or other. Anolik claims that "in the process of childbirth, the comforting integrity of the body is fragmented: one becomes two; what was internal and invisible becomes external and visible" (30). For Arnette, fragmentation is more severe, it occurs before her child is even born, and she feels separate, not only from her baby, but from herself. After a week at the Convent, Connie learns that Arnette "had been hitting her stomach relentlessly. But the real damage was the mop handle inserted with a rapist's skill – mercilessly, repeatedly – between her legs. With the gusto and intention of a rabid male, she had tried to bash the life out of her life" (250). Arnette's fetus, however, "revolts" (250) and tries to save itself by arriving prematurely but ultimately dies.

Eventually Arnette marries K.D., and on the day of her wedding, she returns to the Convent carrying "a piece of wedding cake on a brand-new china plate", claiming, "'I'm married now. [...] Where is he?'" (179). The dead baby that "had it not tried to rescue itself" would have broken "into pieces or drown[ed] in its mother's food" (250) is now being bargained for with a piece of cake, and it is clear that ideas of nourishment are just as "foreign" to Arnette as her mind and body. If, as Bynum claims, "woman is food" ("Fast" 133) in the literal sense of first providing nourishment for her unborn child and then providing milk for her newborn child, then the description of Arnette's actions appear even more extreme. She first offers her child a "mop handle", which would have fragmented him to "pieces", and the baby is described as "drowning" in rather than surviving from her food. Finally, when Arnette returns to the Convent "biting", leaving

“teeth marks” in Pallas’s arm, and offering wedding cake, it is clear that she still has no concept of how to eat or of how to provide nourishment for another.

By the end of the novel, not only is Arnette “pregnant again” (299), but Steward takes “K.D. under his wing, concentrating on making the nephew and sixteen-month-old grandnephew rich” (299-300). Nothing more is learned of Arnette except that she “must be happy now and willing to pass her earlier ‘mistake’ off on the Convent women’s tricking her” (278). Smith-Rosenberg claims:

Abortion is a loaded word. It evokes feelings of fetal life, violence to a woman’s reproductive organs, the retention or expulsion of a foreign body suddenly found within one’s own. It compels men and women to face their feelings about man’s power to impregnate and woman’s power to retain or reject the man’s impregnation. (217)

Smith-Rosenberg’s statement indicates a power struggle inherent in reproduction and its termination, and it can be argued that Arnette has become a victim of Ruby and its prejudices. Close proximity to Steward indicates that she has fallen prey to the curse of “multiplied bounty” followed by increasingly worse natural losses. She has also surrendered to the pact stipulating “unadulteried” blood and has allowed her child to die primarily because it is conceived out of wedlock. Overall, Arnette has inherited a past of isolation so intense that she has severed her mind from her body and both from what her body produces. She has also inherited a sense of rejection so acute, that as she succumbs to the pacts of the Old and New Founders, she perpetuates their prejudices on her unborn child, victimizing it beyond her own victimization. The “values” of the past have progressed through the generations not only to the point where Arnette perpetuates

pain, isolation, and malnourishment, but also to the point where she allows her own fertility to be dictated.

In *The Words to Say It*, which Morrison discusses in *Playing in the Dark*⁶, Marie Cardinal's comment summarizes the mentality of many of Ruby's citizens:

In truth, I didn't really know of what I was afraid [...]. I was afraid of death, but I was also afraid of life which contained death. I was afraid of the outside, but I was also afraid of the inside [...]. I was afraid of the others, but I was afraid of myself who was other. (Cardinal 13)

It is possible to view many of the inhabitants of Ruby simultaneously as victims and perpetrators of fear and otherness. Everything in the town is becoming "other" – from the exclusion of various light-skinned Founders in the Nativity play, to interactions between husbands and wives, to divisions between body and mind, and even to a rejection of one's own offspring. They have accepted their inheritance of prejudice and isolation and have perpetuated it to the extent that future generations are becoming both "naturally" and willfully sterile. Consumed by the past, the future does not look promising for many of Ruby's citizens, and the present seems to hold little hope for salvation. Overall, the concepts of an inhibiting past leading to questionable or non-existent epiphanies is seen in greater detail in *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*.

In *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon*, as in *Paradise*, stories of the past overwhelm characters and produce questionable epiphanies in Morrison's ever-reducing and frequently-dying generations. While *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz* both discuss issues of race, gender, and beauty and differentiate between living life in the city versus the countryside, there are also strong focuses on ancestry and the past. The novels deal with

⁶ *Playing in the Dark* v-xiii.

the orality or musicality of storytelling, and Fabre claims that “stories bear witness to the past” (108). This “bearing witness”, however soon becomes more akin to a haunting, and characters are unable to move beyond the stories they hear and tell in order to plan a future or even to live productive lives in the present. Writing of haunting in literature, Smajic claims:

It is as if the figure of the ghost demarcates the borders of an inhospitable, alien territory where social and political consciousness, the sense of literature’s historical and cultural embeddedness, the intricate network of ties that bind literary to non-literary practices and discourses are somehow mysteriously effaced – temporarily suppressed or forgotten – or, at best, are just barely visible, themselves made insubstantial and spectral. (1108)

Smajic maintains that the idea of being haunted, or that “the figure of the ghost” temporarily removes or lessens the impact of culture and history on a piece of literature. In terms of *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon*, however, haunting occurs because of history and is inextricably linked to culture and the past, and in Gothic America, Goddu states that “American literature [...] is both burdened and constituted by its racial history” (156). Knowledge of history – personal, familial, or societal – can be either liberating or paralyzing and is illustrated through stories and songs which, as they are passed from generation to generation, become “the figure of the ghost.” And, if “the figure of the ghost demarcates the borders of an inhospitable, alien territory”, then for Morrison’s characters, that territory is the future. Although characters try to reconcile the past with the present in both *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*, the past proves too distracting and leads to dubious epiphanies where characters appear to achieve transformations at the cost of the future.

Song of Solomon: “Septic” Stories of the Past

Generations in *Song of Solomon* begin to decrease in size. For instance, Milkman’s great-grandfather, Solomon, has twenty one children and abandons them to slavery. His paternal grandparents, Jake and Sing, die, one in childbirth and the other from a gunshot wound, leaving their two children, Macon and Pilate, orphaned. Pilate only has one daughter, Reba, who despite “living from one orgasm to the next” (150), also only has one daughter, Hagar, who dies without reproducing. Milkman’s two sisters, Lena and Corinthians, never have children either and by the end of the novel are beyond childbearing age. Milkman himself, who is the result of an accidental pregnancy and several unsuccessful abortion attempts, also fails to reproduce. In *Specifying*, Willis states, “The answer to [why characters are the way they are] involves reconstructing the development of the character’s individual personality in relation to the historical forces that have shaped the migrations of her race, the struggles of her community, and the relationships that have developed within her family” (3). Willis notes the influence of history, family, and the external world on the individual’s development. In *Song of Solomon*, obsessions with various interpretations of the past and with the rejection and abandonment associated with those interpretations, paralyzes certain characters in the present. They become so consumed that the paralysis translates into inability to reproduce in the present, and such emotional, physical, and mental sterility results in questionable futures and questionable epiphanies.

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman’s childhood companion, Guitar, joins a vigilante group called the Seven Days. The group enacts its version of justice after someone in the black community is murdered by then killing someone from the white community on

the same day, in the same manner, and with the same weapon. Guitar's explanation for killing randomly rather than seeking the perpetrators involves proliferation and a different kind of equality:

“Any man, any woman, or any child is good for five to seven generations of heirs before they're bred out. So every death is the death of five to seven generations. You can't stop them from killing us, from trying to get rid of us. And each time they succeed, they get rid of five to seven generations. I help keep the numbers the same.” (154)

The “equality” that concerns Guitar is the ability to reproduce, and he views murder as an act that robs an individual and a race of the opportunity to create generations. He explains to Milkman, ““It's not about you living longer. [...] It's about whether your children can make other children”” (160). Cade Bambara claims, “The all too breezy no-pill/ mess-up-the-man's-plan notion that these [...] Sisters find so exciting is very seductive because it's a clear-cut and easy thing for her to do for the cause since it nourishes her sense of martyrdom” (168). She maintains, unlike Guitar and Marcus Garvey, that having children for the sake of “keeping the numbers the same” is too simplistic and she also disparages the “martyrdom” involved with what she views as irresponsible family and revolution planning. Ironically, despite Guitar's focus on numbers, members of the Seven Days are not permitted to marry or to have children, and many of the other characters in *Song of Solomon* are also unable or unwilling to reproduce.

Guitar's own sterile present is not only illustrated through his interaction with the Seven Days, but through the experiences that encouraged him to join. He claims he hates sugar, candy, and sweets because they make him ““think of dead people and white people”” and cause him to ““puke”” (61). When Milkman asks, ““How long have you

been like that?,” Guitar responds, “‘Since I was little. Since my father got sliced up in a sawmill and his boss came by and gave us some candy. Divinity. A big sack of divinity. His wife made it special for us. It’s sweet, divinity is. Sweeter than syrup. Real sweet. Sweeter than...’” (61). Guitar then excuses himself to vomit, and he associates anything sweet with his father’s death and his father’s dead body. Although the candy is ironically named “divinity”, Guitar cannot move beyond the physicality of his father’s death and is worried that “when his father awakened on the Judgment Day, his first sight would be [...] his own other eye” (224). What Guitar does not tell Milkman is that “It wasn’t the divinity from the foreman’s wife that made him sick. That came later. It was the fact that instead of life insurance, the sawmill owner gave his mother forty dollars to ‘tide you and them kids over’, and she took it happily and bought each of them a big peppermint stick on the day of the funeral” (224-225). Candy becomes another instance for Guitar of the crimes that white society perpetrates on the black community, and sugar can be viewed as the ultimate example of, as Parker claims, “exploitative, white male power” (623).⁷ It also comes to represent what he believes is his mother’s submission as well as his father’s death, and his body physically rejects those aspects of his past. His father’s death becomes a literal abandonment, and he views his mother’s behavior as an ideological abandonment of a cause he now fervently endorses. Unlike Milkman, who eventually embarks on a quest for his heritage, Guitar does not venture on any journey, and he tells his friend, “‘What good is a man’s life if he can’t choose what to die for?’” (223). Not only does Guitar commit murder, but

⁷ As well as Parker’s article, Sidney Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power* thoroughly discusses the relationships between sugar, slavery, and white consumerism.

everything in his life revolves around death: his father's, his own, someone he plans to kill. His existence is sterile, the only thoughts he has of a future involve death, and he lives the life that the past has handed to him with a piece of candy.

As opposed to Guitar, Milkman who, when he learns at four “that only birds and airplanes could fly – lost all interest in himself” (9), begins *Song of Solomon* rejecting what he believes to be his inheritance: others' problems and others' pain. He remains detached from life, his past, and his present, feeling as though he is “the outsider in his family” and “only vaguely involved with his friends” (293). Milkman's ignorance of the past and of his surroundings translates into obliviousness in the present. One day, while analyzing himself in the mirror, he notes:

It [his face] lacked a coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back. The decision he made would be extremely important, but the way in which he made the decision would be careless, haphazard, and uninformed. (69-70)

Milkman's lack of substance is translated into fragmentation, and his obliviousness is illustrated through the phrase, “careless, haphazard, and uninformed.” He is also spatially fragmented and feels as though the present is “someplace he is not supposed to be”, and the phrase “whether to go forward or to turn back” appears ominous, as though he must choose between the past and the future. Throughout the novel, before Milkman begins to hear stories about his past, he is preoccupied with things behind him. As a child, when his family goes for Sunday drives in his father's Packard, “riding backward made him [Milkman] uneasy. It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going – just where he had been – troubled him” (32). Milkman's dislike of “where he

had been” is also illustrated through his desire “to hear the solid click of a door” closing behind him (162), and this preoccupation shows Milkman’s initial ignorance of the past. However, “It was becoming a habit. This preoccupation with things behind him. Almost as though there was no future to be had. But if the future did not arrive, the present did extend itself” (35). Before Milkman is even told of his family’s history, he already appears distracted by the past. The future seems unknown and unattainable, and the present appears insubstantial, foreign, and paralyzing. Not only is he physically and spatially withdrawn and detached, but Otten claims that Milkman also “exists in spiritual stasis” (49). He has become so deflated by the information he receives at the age of four that he remains disinterested and disassociated with anything else the world has to offer. He is concerned only with himself, he is unaware of the details of his family’s history and how they have or could affect him, and the future appears as an unfathomable void.

It is not until later in the novel that Milkman learns that his mother Ruth “tricked” his father, with the help of her sister-in-law Pilate, into impregnating her:

Her son had never been a person to her, a separate real person. He had always been a passion. [...] Even before his birth he was a strong feeling – a feeling about the nasty greenish gray powder Pilate had given her to be stirred into rainwater and put into food. But Macon came out of his few days of sexual hypnosis in a rage and later when he discovered her pregnancy, tried to get her to abort. [...] The baby became the nausea caused by the half ounce of castor oil Macon made her drink, then a hot pot recently emptied of scalding water on which she sat then a soapy enema, a knitting needle (she inserted only the tip, squatting in the bathroom, crying, afraid of the man who paced outside the door), and finally, when he punched her stomach [...] she ran to the Southside looking for Pilate. (131)

In one paragraph, Morrison conveys a multitude of familial relationships. To his mother, Milkman seems part of her, rather than an individual. He has also been used as

a means to recapture Macon's affection, and then as a substitute when Ruth's plans result in only a temporary seduction. To Macon, Milkman represents a plethora of failed abortion attempts as well as the product of Pilate's manipulations. Pilate however, has not only saved Milkman's life, but she has, to an extent, created it. Until her "greenish gray powder", Macon and Ruth had not had sexual relations for a decade, and the desire to reproduce was nonexistent. Overall, Milkman enters the world as a "passion", as a deception, as "nausea", and ultimately as unwanted. He is the result of forced fertility, loneliness, desperation, conspiracy, and ineffective attempts to abort, and his personal history is intertwined with violence and discord.

Learning of his conception and birth initially causes Milkman to alienate himself further from his recent past. He is content to tell Guitar that his only desire is to go "“wherever the party is”" (106), and Milkman believes, "His life was pointless, aimless, and it was true that he didn't concern himself an awful lot about other people. [...] He was bored. Everybody bored him" (107). Much like Sula in chapter one, Milkman is restless and impossible to entertain, and rather than face his present or his past, Milkman prefers the oblivion of death and the sensation of fear it inspires:

Gradually his fear of and eagerness for death returned. Above all he wanted to escape what he knew, escape the implications of what he had been told. And all he knew in the world was what other people told him. He felt like a garbage pail for the actions and hatred of other people.
(120)

Instead of searching for substance, Milkman initially prefers death as an alleviation for or "escape" from his boredom and his parents' stories, and his ignorance, emptiness, and inaction make him the ideal receptacle or "garbage pail" for others' prejudices or ideas. Just as Helene chooses to define herself through others' perceptions and refuses the

responsibility of defining herself, Milkman too remains extremely sedentary, allowing others' actions to replace and usurp his own. He claims:

He just wanted to beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well. [...] And his efforts to ignore it, transcend it, seemed to work only when he spent his days looking for whatever was light-hearted and without grave consequences [...]. He wanted to know as little as possible [...]. He'd always believed his childhood was sterile, but the knowledge Macon and Ruth had given him wrapped his memory of it in septic sheets, heavy with the odor of illness, misery, and unforgiving hearts [...]. (180)

Because of the fragmented pieces of unsettling information Milkman receives from his parents, he decides that he prefers ignorance to knowledge. From his parents' stories, Milkman learns how precisely their problems can become his, and the realization that their disagreements nearly result in the loss of his life before he is even born causes him to question what he has inherited and how it could still possibly affect him. He notes the stunted nature of his parents' relationship, unchanging since his birth, and rejects it as well as his family. Much like the generational degeneration in *Paradise* and Nathan's dream, there is also something toxic in the "septic sheets" of Milkman's heritage, birth, and childhood. While his family presents the appearance of respectability, a history of disease, discord, and violence lurks beneath the façade. Sontag notes that "illness expands by means of two hypotheses", one of which is psychological. In the psychological interpretation of illness, Sontag maintains that "people are encouraged to believe that they get sick because they (unconsciously) want to, and that they can cure themselves by the mobilization of will; that they can choose not to die of the disease" (60). In terms of *Song of Solomon*, the implication is that Milkman believes his parents have chosen their predicament, that escape might be possible, and that the past is a

disease of which to be cured. For the moment, though, Milkman cannot find a way to “transcend” the stagnation of his present or the “septic sheets” of his childhood, and he can only reconcile them in negative or superficial ways. The knowledge that Milkman has inadvertently acquired is of a past replete with deception and forced fertility, and the negative, but extremely active behavior of his relatives results in a paralysis in Milkman in the present, and despite the rejection of his immediate and “diseased” past, he fails to achieve any “mobilization of will.” Disliking what he has so far discovered, Milkman temporarily stops all inquiry into his heritage while simultaneously halting any future that could be tainted by it. Brogan claims, however, that “flight from history can just as easily lead to [...] a nostalgic return to the past: denied history asserts itself, much like the return of the repressed” (9). There is something forboding in Brogan’s statement, as she implies that the past cannot be fully denied, and soon Milkman becomes embroiled in more stories involving a different kind of inheritance.

When Pilate and Macon are young, their father Jake is murdered for his land. The two children escape and eventually find themselves hiding in a cave where they encounter a white man. Panicking, Macon stabs the man and discovers gold hidden beneath the body. Disagreeing over whether to keep or leave the money, Macon and Pilate go separate ways, only to meet again later in life, and Macon leaves the cave with the belief that land and gold are his rightful inheritance. Pilate, however, leaves with the notion that personal responsibility is her true inheritance. She believes, ““You can’t take a life and walk off and leave it. Life is life. Precious. And the dead you kill is yours. They stay with you anyway, in your mind. So it’s a better thing, a more better thing to have the bones right there with you wherever you go. That way, it frees up your mind””

(208). In order to accept her responsibilities more fully, Pilate returns to the cave of her childhood to retrieve the bones she believes are the white man's, takes them home, and hangs them in a bag from her ceiling as a reminder of what she has inherited. To Pilate, life, death, and the body all equate to responsibility, and by accepting them, she gains a sense of spirituality where she is able to reconcile her body with her mind and live freely, unafraid of judgment or death. Macon, however, believes that Pilate is hoarding the gold from the cave and instructs Milkman to retrieve it. Milkman then begins a journey not only with desires to escape the boredom of his present or the toxicity of his past, but with ideas of accumulated wealth inherited from his father.

Looting Pilate's house, Milkman soon discovers that bones, not gold, are in the bag hanging from the ceiling, and he journeys south to search for the cave and the wealth it might contain. Rather than discovering gold, Milkman unearths more stories from the past, and it seems his parents are not the only Deads to tamper with life. As he travels, in quest-like fashion, from his home in Michigan to his ancestral home in the south, he gradually hears stories about his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Fabre claims that Milkman is "unimaginative and uncommitted, a reluctant confidant, a poor listener who does not pay attention to words, asks the wrong questions, and offers erroneous interpretations. He is ill-equipped for the quest: an imperfect enquirer into a heritage that is cumbersome to him" (108). Despite his increasing interest, Milkman's pursuit of the past is still tainted by his former obliviousness, and he has difficulty comprehending the information he is told. Unaccustomed to meaningful human relationships, Milkman struggles to interact with the strangers who begin to fill in the gaps of his family history. Gradually, however, he pieces the fragments of the stories

together. By the end of the novel, Milkman learns by repeatedly hearing a song sung by children that his great-grandfather, Solomon, possessed the African gift of flight, and it becomes clear that Milkman's love of flying is not merely personal but that it too is a trait that he has inherited (303).

The song further illustrates that Milkman has a choice in his inheritance, and he does not necessarily need to follow his father's pursuit of wealth. Willis notes:

The descent into the past means stepping out of reified and fetishized relationships. Milkman's sensitivities are abruptly awakened when, trudging through the woods, he is scratched by branches, bruised by rocks, and soaked in a stream. As all of his commodified possessions fall away – his watch, his Florsheim shoes, and his three-piece suit – he comes to realize a full range of sensual perceptions [...] he had never before experienced. ("Funk" 38)

The implications of Willis's statement are that as Milkman begins to explore his ancestral past, his own personal history begins to literally and figuratively "fall away" and he learns new ways of interacting with people. The sense of greed inherited from his father is stripped away by nature, and he gradually starts to realize a potential for redemption in his heritage; he begins to progress from a bored, selfish obliviousness and a "diseased" recent history, to a "willfully motivated" determination to discover his ancient past. However, while his journey and the song of his ancestors seem to offer liberation through the idea of flight and newfound community, they also offer a different kind of liberation obtained through knowledge and choice. Listening to the song, Milkman realizes it is not simply an homage to the departed Solomon, who manages to escape slavery and return to Africa. It is also a lament for Ryna and the twenty-one children that he abandons to slavery in return for his own freedom, and Morrison states that the song is remembered "half in glory and half in accusation" (Watkins 46). Rigney

further maintains that it is “the distintegration of family” that is “part of the horror of the Black experience under slavery” (“Story” 230). Based on Rigney’s statement, Solomon’s act of flight becomes something even more than liberation and abandonment; it becomes an endorsement of the very horror from which he is fleeing. The “Song of Solomon” and “the descent into the past” depict a variety of possibilities for Milkman. They present contrasting notions of liberation, where flight means freedom and abandonment and where a return to the past offers conflicting ideas of sacrificing one’s own community and family in favor of ancestral roots. Alwes claims that for Morrison, “history is what the individual learns to do with it, not a cultural force into which the individual is absorbed” (361). Knowledge of his ancestry grants Milkman freedom of choice in the present where he learns that the past, though unchanging, is interpretable.

While Milkman begins to acknowledge the various liberations and constraints associated with his past, he fails to consider the future. In “The Future of Time”, Morrison states:

Time, it seems, has no future. That is, time no longer seems to be an endless stream through which the human species moves with confidence in its own increasing consequence and value. It certainly seems not to have a future that equals the length or breadth or sweep or even the fascination of the past. (*Margin* 170)

Morrison maintains that the past appears more “fascinating” and more palpable than the future. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman’s personal history is temporarily set aside in favor of his ancient past, and any desire to look ahead has stopped. His youthful preoccupation with things behind him has burgeoned into an ancestral obsession, and while he is adding substance to his formerly oblivious life, but he is still ignoring his future. Reconciliation has not yet occurred; “The Song of Solomon” is then substituted

for the absent gold from the cave, and Milkman uses both as a means to escape his present and his future.

Jazz: A Doll Tale

In *Jazz*, as well as *Song of Solomon*, characters' lives are inhibited by the past, which is so pervasive in the novel that even the narrator claims, "I was so sure it would happen. That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle" (220). Like the "Song of Solomon" that is repeated from generation to generation and the endless stories in *Paradise*, the narrator in *Jazz* initially contends that the past is fated to endlessly repeat itself, infiltrating the present. The narrator's comments indicate, as Treherne claims, "a problematized relation to the process of narration" (199). Characters manage to "somehow escape the narration and make it a victim of itself" (199). Like the characters she attempts to narrate, the speaker in *Jazz* becomes so consumed by the past that she loses all omniscience and credibility. She admits that she is mistaken, and she feels that "something rogue" (228) has broken the cyclic nature of the past. Sweeney claims:

In this instance, "something rogue" functions as an awareness that characters' pasts cannot provide a full accounting of their present and future situations – trying to render the past completely commensurate with the present and the future involves a reification of the characters and a failure to account for their capacity for healing and transformation. The narrator's conviction of "something rogue" thus emphasizes the role that human agency can play in breaking out of a predetermined groove of inevitable suffering, and it enables the novel's ultimate vision of healing and redemption. (448)

Sweeney asserts that a character's past will not necessarily determine her present or her future, and she maintains that by the end of the novel, Morrison's protagonists have

“healed” and “transformed” themselves. It is true that characters’ behaviors remain unpredictable and that they cannot be, much to the dismay of the Old and New Founders in *Paradise*, merely “duplicates” of the past. However, the purpose of the past in *Jazz* seems to be more of a matter of preoccupation than of prediction. Page claims that “roguehood is needed” and that “holding onto anything is dangerous, dangerously static, dangerously death-like” (“Traces” 60). Characters are so distracted by the presence or absence of their ancestors that they struggle to live meaningful lives in the present, and while some “healing” may begin to occur at the end of the novel, characters never do manage to fully “transform” themselves. Rather, a reconciliation takes place where the main characters can be seen as trying to merge the past with the present; however, such a reconciliation does not automatically imply that there is a future. If the all-consuming qualities of the past, or the “cracks” that cause the record to skip and play in endless repetition are obliterated, it is also not necessarily because characters have fully reconciled the past with the present, but because most of the novel’s characters can no longer reproduce, and there is no one new to listen to or to be affected by the “abused record.” Joe, Violet, and Alice, the novel’s main protagonists, are past childbearing age, and Dorcas, Alice’s orphaned niece and Joe’s mistress, is dead from the beginning of the novel. By the end of the novel, Dorcas’s friend Felice, who also befriends Joe and Violet and who inspires the narrator to claim that she is mistaken about the “grooves” of the past, is seen buying a record (222). In *Jazz*, obsessions with the past cause sterility in the present. As characters struggle to merge the past with the present, they miscarry, maim, and kill, and as a result, they also struggle to achieve a reconciliation.

In *Jazz*, ideas of sterility and paralysis are further illustrated through the novel's theatricality. "The City" appears as a stage, as a backdrop and reason for the behavior of the characters that traverse it, and the novel even provides a score for its setting, letting both the structure and the sounds of jazz infiltrate its text. The novel's main characters are also all employed by an aspect of the theater: Joe sells make-up and beauty products, Violet is a hairdresser, and Alice is a seamstress. All three main characters use their make-up, hair, and costuming talents to decorate the main attraction in their lives, and Dorcas herself remains unoccupied and the center of attention, letting her body be adorned literally and imaginatively by those around her. After her death, characters then obsessively view her photograph, continuing to decorate her with meaning, and McDowell claims that even before her death, Dorcas is "reduced to a snapshot" (4). City, music, and characters are all equally available to be imagined, reworked, retold, and reshaped by narrator, reader, and artist alike, and the idea of theatricality seems to create an atmosphere of insubstantiality that is both inherited and paralyzing. Morrison highlights her characters' inability to achieve substance through her use of prop-like imagery, and as characters resemble or become fascinated with dolls, Morrison depicts their preoccupations as a legacy inherited from the mixed race, illegitimate Golden Gray.

Golden Gray is the son of Vera Louise, a wealthy white girl who has an affair with a black man, Henry Lestroy, also known as Hunters Hunter, who eventually raises the orphaned Joe. When Vera Louise's parents discover her affair, they give her money, slap her face, and banish her. She takes True Belle, Violet's grandmother, with her, and Violet's and Joe's histories intersect at Golden Gray. Together True Belle and Vera

Louise raise Golden, who “passes” as white with no knowledge of his family history.

Dyer claims:

Inter-racial heterosexuality threatens the power of whiteness because it breaks the legitimization of whiteness with references to the white body. If white bodies are no longer indubitably white bodies, if they can no longer guarantee their own reproduction as white, then the “natural” basis of their domination is no longer credible. (25)

Dyer maintains that inter-racial relationships and reproduction threaten white feelings of power and authority. In *Jazz*, Golden Gray epitomizes the “threat” in Dyer’s statement, as his skin color and hair prevent any outside knowledge of his racial inheritance.

Rather than loving him only for his white skin and blond hair, it can be said that True Belle adores Golden Gray because of his heritage, because of his ability to have white skin and blond hair without being completely white. Later in life, after asking True Belle about his parentage, she tells him about Henry Lestroy, and similarly to Milkman, Golden Gray begins a quest for knowledge. J. Adams states, “To the whiteman it [his face/ color] means his tradition, his civilization, his bond and recognition in the present age, and his safeguard in the future” (66). Feeling bereft of the familiar, of the traditions and the “civilization” of the white man, Golden Gray seeks his heritage to discover his future. The story of Golden’s search, however, becomes intertwined with Violet’s story, and she struggles to understand what she perceives as her grandmother’s love for white skin and blond hair.

Golden Gray and the past become so pervasive that they commandeer the text, and the story of Violet and Joe in the “present” is constantly being interrupted by the narratives of their ancestors. Brogan illustrates the flux between competing story lines, or competing realities for the characters, and claims:

Traumatic memory, precisely because it remains unassimilated into existing mental constructs for making sense of experience, tends to establish a parallel reality; the realms of trauma and ordinary life are experienced as a double existence, the one governed by ordinary chronology, the other, being “in a sense timeless”, liable to spring to life at any moment. (73)

“Traumatic memories” in *Jazz* include Violet’s belief of her grandmother’s preference for a light-skinned, golden haired child over her own family, as well as Joe’s feeling of having no family and no heritage. Their tendencies to relive the past and the stories they have been told become so intense that those stories usurp their own, there is no “chronology” to the text, and “at any moment” any one of the deceased characters is “liable to spring to life” both in the text and in characters’ imaginations. In *Jazz*, the past is “unassimilated” with the present to the extent that, much like *Love* and Mr. Cosey in chapter one, the characters’ preoccupations become the reader’s. As fragments of stories and wisps of ancestors pervade their lives, however, Joe and Violet are still no closer to understanding their pasts, and they are left with the insubstantial features of their heritage. This lack of substance from the past consumes them, and they begin to emulate their ancestors, preventing their own growth in the present. Overall, the portrayal of Golden Gray is one where any possible reality is so mingled with story-telling that he fails to become anything more than a beautifully adorned prop that haunts later generations.

Much like a baby doll, Golden Gray has “a head swollen with fat champagne-colored curls” (148-149), and his mother dresses him “like the Prince of Wales” (14). As well as his hair, his clothing emphasizes his prop-like qualities, indicating a sterility and a lack of substance:

Golden Gray went into the second room to change his clothes – this time he chose something formal, elegant. [...] To select a very fine shirt; to unfold dark blue trousers that fit just so. [...] When he took them out and laid them carefully on the cot – the yellow shirt, the trousers with buttons of bone on the fly, the butter-colored waistcoat – the arrangement lying on the bed, looked like an empty man with one arm folded under. He sat down on the rough mattress near the trouser cuffs, and when dark spots formed on the cloth he saw that he was crying. (158)

Golden Gray comes complete with accessories, and his clothing and appearance are described more intricately than his personality, and when his most “elegant” clothes are cataloged and displayed on the bed, they form the shape of a lifeless prop. Golden then commences a mental analogy comparing the inanimate, one-armed form on the bed with himself and the absence of a father, and when he begins to cry, it is as though he is a Pinocchio-like boy coming to life for the first time. Golden’s potential transition from doll to man remains unnarrated, however, and it is only the outline of him that Joe encounters years later in Wild’s cave. Wild, Joe’s purported mother, lives on the fringes of society, refusing most social interaction and also refusing to raise, nurse, or look at Joe. Later in life, when Joe “hunts” her to determine if she really is his mother, he discovers her cave, which appears more as a child’s playhouse or hideaway than as a living space:

A green dress. A rocking chair without an arm. A circle of stones for cooking. Jars, baskets, pots; a doll, a spindle, earrings, a photograph, a stack of sticks, a set of silver brushes and a silver cigar case. Also. Also a pair of man’s trousers with buttons of bone. Carefully folded, a silk shirt, faded pale and creamy – except at the seams. There both thread and fabric were a fresh and sunny yellow. (184)

Though filled with items, the cave still feels barren and empty. Wild and Golden Gray are nowhere to be found, and their personalities and even bodies, exist only in a litany of seemingly random objects. Not only has the cave been temporarily abandoned, but it

appears almost as a set stage, waiting for characters to take their places, pick up their belongings, and resume their activities. They are both present and absent, and Homans claims that “an absence that is present, that is tangible, is a ghost” (379). Erikson also states that the “characteristics of the spectral” in Morrison’s novels include “its manifestations of absence, its liability to vanish, its transference between worlds, and its amalgamation of the material world” (21-22). As Golden Gray and Wild move between imagination and reality and between the past and the present, they inhabit a variety of “worlds”, leaving behind “traces” of themselves. The remnants of Golden Gray and Wild become haunting to Joe, and Yaegar poses the question:

What happens if we look at the gothic trauma of race via these odds and ends that denote the unseen? What happens when we summon [...] elusive scenes of trauma in the air? [...] Excess, monstrosity, perversion, nightmares, rattling machinery: these rhetorical structures give way to less operative forms in which fragments, residues, or traces of trauma fashion a regime of haunting. [...] The vestige, the scrap, the reminder [is] the force that’s most frightening. (90)

Yaegar discusses Morrison’s use of “fragments”, “scraps”, and “remnants” and claims that they constitute a revised version of the “southern gothic” (90). In *Jazz*, the scenes describing Golden Gray’s accessories and Wild’s cave are not frightening in a traditional sense. Rather, the absence of a discernable human being becomes haunting. The unknown infiltrates the text, placing emphasis on material, inanimate objects and replacing humanity with sterility.

Violet also carries a materialistically sterile mental image of Golden Gray, and she pictures him living “with Miss Vera Louise in the fine stone house on Edison Street, where the linen was embroidered with blue thread and there was nothing to do but raise and adore the blond boy who ran away from them depriving everybody of his carefully

loved hair” (17). Violet seems unable to comprehend her grandmother’s pleasure and attributes it solely to Golden Gray’s blond curls. The role of Golden Gray in Violet’s life echoes W.E.B. DuBois’s reflections on the birth, death, and appearance of his infant son:

How beautiful he was, with his olive-tinted flesh and dark gold ringlets, his eyes of mingled blue and brown [...]. Why was his hair tinted with gold? An evil omen was golden hair in my life. Why had not the brown of his eyes crushed and killed the blue? (170)

In DuBois’s memoir and True Belle’s stories, the individual’s personality is usurped by questions of race, love becomes intertwined with appearance, and memory becomes tainted by color. Through her grandmother’s stories, Violet becomes obsessed, much like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, with the love she believes can be found in a head of blond hair, and she eventually dedicates her life both to hairdressing and to discovering a prop of her very own to decorate and to dress. Discussing Pecola’s obsession with the blue eyes on a Shirley Temple cup, Cynthia Davis claims that “Shirley Temple cannot really be loved or imitated because she is just a doll, an image without a self behind it” (328). The fact that Golden Gray, like Shirley Temple, is just an image to Violet illustrates the futility in attempting to imitate him. True Belle’s stories, Dubois’s lament, and Davis’s comment all indicate a preoccupation with appearance that largely captures an “image” without positive substance. Reflecting on interracial reproduction, Frazier claims, “The class of mixed-bloods who were thus created formed the most important channel by which the ideals, customs, and mores of the whites were mediated” (361). Despite Frazier’s support of white values being “mediated” to blacks, there are underlying elements of fear and danger in his statement. If white values are transmitted through

“mixed bloods”, then it implies that black culture will be usurped and dominated.

Frazier’s comment indicates the possibility that skin color could be a vehicle for inheriting and transmitting values, and his statement causes the notion of insubstantiality to be questioned. Not only would DuBois’s son, Violet’s props, or Pecola’s Shirley Temple cup represent simply an image, but they would represent an image of negative assimilation, of instilling foreign values, and of usurping a culture.

Violet, however, sees only love and abandonment in the image of blond curls, and after several miscarriages and finally beyond childbearing age, she begins to intertwine thoughts of Golden Gray and baby dolls with the child she never had:

That was when she bought herself a present; hid it under the bed to take it out in secret when it couldn’t be helped. She began to imagine how old that last miscarried child would be now. A girl, probably. Certainly a girl. Who would she favor? What would her speaking voice sound like? [...] Later on, Violet would dress her hair for her the way girls wore it now: short, bangs paper sharp above the eyebrows? Ear curls? Razor-thin part on the side? Hair sliding into careful waves marcelled to a T? (108)

Violet imagines the daughter she miscarried, envisions telling her stories, pictures arranging her hair, and purchases a baby doll on which to carry out her fantasies. The aborted child is not fully a reality to her, and it instead represents a lost opportunity to recreate her own Golden Gray, to have a daughter with “the best-dressed hair in the city”, and to experience a time when they could be “cozy in the kitchen” together “while Violet did her hair” (109). Morrison mentions that “it is remarkable how often imaginative forays into the far and distant future have been solely and simply opportunities to re-imagine or alter the present *as past*. And this looking back [...] offers no solace whatsoever for humanity’s future” (*Margin* 171). For Violet, the future

is not simply “re-imagined”, but it has no chance of becoming a reality. Her fantasies are modernized, personalized versions of True Belle’s Golden Gray stories. Much like Joe’s impressions of his mother and Golden Gray, Violet’s longings for her miscarried child are represented merely as an outline of a life. She too creates a stage in her mind, complete with a location and accessories, and decides not what personality her child would have, but what physical adornments.

Brogan poses the question, “Can ethnic identities be assumed and discarded like costumes (hiding, by implication, some inner ‘true’ self or an essential identic emptiness)?” (13). Brogan postulates whether identities can be chosen, and if so, if they can then be discarded or hidden. It seems because Violet herself does not have hair or skin color capable of emulating Golden Gray’s that she attempts to compensate for what she views as her “ethnic identity” by first hiding her desires and then transferring them to baby dolls and her miscarried child. Similarly, Golden Gray also attempts to adopt or discard an identity through the various “costumes” and accessories with which he travels. In her article “Wounded Beauty”, Cheng discusses psychology and *Brown v. the Board of Education*, which is the court case that dealt with desegregation in America. Her findings include interviews conducted in an effort to determine whether or not African American children could perceive racial difference:

Interview after interview, they found that, given the choice between two kinds of dolls, the majority of African American children, even the three year olds, found “brown” dolls to be “bad” and preferred instead to play with “nice”, “white” dolls. The children also went on to identify the white dolls as ones “most like themselves.” (194)

Cheng notes the overwhelming consistency with which black children attribute qualities of “nice” to whiteness and “bad” to darkness, and her summary of the conducted

interviews corresponds to Brogan's questioning of a choice in "ethnic identity." Based on Brogan's argument, as well as Cheng's observations, the next question is, "How possible is it [...] for a dark-skinned individual to *choose* not to be black in racist America?" (Brogan 12-13). In terms of *Jazz*, it appears that Golden Gray is afforded not only the choice of skin color, but also the choice of ancestry that necessarily accompanies it. Having this choice makes stories of him even less relatable and only serves to insubstantiate him further; he is both ghost and fantasy. By transferring her obsessions to dolls and by reliving stories of Golden Gray and her miscarried child in her imagination, Violet is very much aware that she has no control over her race, her ancestry, or her fertility, and rather than reconciling the past with her present, Violet instead substitutes imitation for reconciliation.

Violet's obsessions with the past and Golden Gray are translated into a sterile preoccupation with her body, baby dolls, and lost child, all of which are eventually transferred to Dorcas. To Violet, Dorcas is a "light-skinned person with coal black eyes" who "needed her ends cut" (15) and who was "very well thought of in the legally licensed beauty parlor" (5). Violet's desire to emulate Golden is transformed into a desire to imitate Dorcas, and she "found out what kind of lip rouge the girl wore, the marcelling iron they used on her [...]; the band the girl liked best [...]. And when she was shown how, Violet did the dance steps the dead girl used to do" (5). Again, Violet is presented with an outline of a life and becomes consumed by it. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison's comment on Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* also summarizes Violet's behavior in that by imitating Dorcas, "she escapes the necessity of inhabiting her own body" (26). However, just as the array of items in Wild's cave could not

provide Joe with a clear vision of the people who inhabit it, the list of Dorcas's beauty products does not give Violet a realistic picture of the girl and it instead haunts her. Discussing *The Bluest Eye*, Willis notes, "When Claudia destroys [the white baby doll...] she is also striking out against the horrifying dehumanization that acceptance of the model implies – both for the black who wears it as a mask and for the white who creates commodified images of the self" ("Funk" 36). Swathed in commodities and viewed through them, Dorcas is already, by Willis's definition, "dehumanized." By not only accepting, but by actively pursuing this commodified image of Dorcas, Violet imitates an imitation and lessens her own substantiality, as well as the potential for a genuine reconciliation.

Violet's search for reconciliation also includes Dorcas's aunt Alice, and the afternoons they spend together involve conversations questioning their lives. Violet claims:

"We women, me and you. Tell me something real [...]. I'm fifty and I don't know nothing."
"Wake up. Fat or lean, you got just one [life]. This is it."
"You don't know either, do you?"
"I know enough to know how to behave."
"Is that it? Is that all it is?"
"Is that all what is?"
"Oh, shoot! Where the grown people? Is it us?"
"Oh, Mama." Alice Manfred blurted it out and then covered her mouth.
(110)

Violet and Alice do not know where to search for guidance in life. Abandoned by her father in favor of politics, by Joe in favor of Dorcas, by True Belle in favor of Golden Gray, and by her mother Rose Dear in favor of death, Violet is one of the "children of suicides" who is "hard to please and quick to believe no one loves" her (4). This sense

of abandonment, seemingly devoid of love, is reflected in Violet's conversation with Alice, who has also been abandoned by her husband for another woman. Despite Violet's statement of her age and the claim that she and Alice are "women", their conversation remains child-like and filled with longing. Statements of knowing "how to behave" and questions asking "where the grown people" are, illustrate both women's need for guidance and a sense of belonging. The conversation also reflects Corinthians's claim in *Song of Solomon* that "every woman she knew was a doll baby" (177). Frazier claims, "Family traditions and social distinctions that had meaning in the relatively simple and stable southern communities have lost their meaning in the new world of the modern city" (364). Violet's and Alice's location adds to their sense of disorientation, they no longer know what their roles should be in society or in the family, and "tradition" consists of half-told stories by relatives who are now deceased. Alwes notes that in *Jazz*, Morrison also "isolates [her characters] generationally. None of the major characters has either parents or children" (354). In *The Growth of the Black Population*, Farley too notes a sense of generational isolation:

As of 1920, blacks in cities were not bearing enough children to replace themselves. [...] Blacks who were recent immigrants to cities had not developed feelings of belonging to a community, and as a result, ties of family life were broken and most blacks lived in a disorganized environment. (193)

Farley maintains that feelings of displacement and isolation provide a partial explanation for decreasing fertility. Abandoned, Violet and Alice function in a vague space where they are neither parent nor child, and the loss of past and future generations causes them to struggle in the present. Alice's and Violet's conversation, combined with Alwes's, Farley's, and Frazier's statements, indicates not just isolation, but an almost desperate

desire to find substance, to discover more from the past than rejection and golden ringlets, and to be able to expect more from the future than lip rouge and marcelling irons. The conversation is rife with the loss of both the past and the future, and desires for guidance and reconciliation in the present are mingled with abandonment.

Dorcas too, like Violet before and after her, is consumed by the past and seeks to imitate that which she has lost. Her past includes a fire that kills her parents and burns her baby dolls, and she laments, “There was no getting in that house where her clothespin dolls lay in a row. In a cigar box. But she tried anyway to get them. Barefoot, in the dress she had slept in, she ran to get them, and yelled to her mother that the box of dolls, the box of dolls was up there on the dresser can we get them? Mama?” (38). As she grows older, Dorcas focuses on the loss of her dolls rather than on the loss of her parents, and the preoccupation soon translates into insubstantiality in the present. To her aunt Alice, she becomes an object on which to perpetuate the overly-modest values of Alice’s parents. She “hid the girl’s hair in braids tucked under” (54) and “worked hard to privatize her niece” (67). Alice attempts to hide, not merely Dorcas’s sexuality, but her “ethnic identity”, covering her hair and light skin as much as possible. She further advocates “deafness” and “blindness” (54) as well as how to “avoid” and “disappear” (55), most of which “she could affect with her dress” (55).

Alice, however, is “no match for a City seeping music” (67) or for “ready-for-bed-in-the-street-clothes” (55), and Dorcas and her friend Felice soon discard the stifling clothing in which Alice dresses her. Creating “pencil-thin eyebrows” and buying “shoes with leather cut out to look like lace” (190), Dorcas attempts to create a personality the

only way she knows: by playing “dress-up.” However, she only succeeds in exaggerating her doll-like qualities:

Dorcas, at sixteen, has yet to wear silk hose and her shoes are those of someone much younger or very old. Felice has helped her to loosen two braids behind her ears and her fingertip is stained with the rouge she has stroked across her lips. [...] They know that a body dressed badly is nobody at all. (65)

Much like Golden Gray, there is a focus on Dorcas’s clothes and appearance, and not only is she fully accessorized, but regardless of what she wears, it seems Dorcas needs help getting assembled. By the end of the novel, Felice reflects on her own life and on the moments before Dorcas’s death, and she realizes that she has inadvertently allowed Dorcas to be buried with an heirloom. Felice comforts herself by remembering that the ring matched Dorcas’s “bracelet and matched the house where the party was” (215). Felice also remembers the discussions immediately following the shooting and notes that everyone focused on the blood, not seeping out of Dorcas, but ruining a mattress and clothing (210). In *Sex and Temperament*, Mead states, “Studies like Mrs. Putnam’s *The Lady* depict woman as an infinitely malleable lay figure on which mankind has draped ever varying period-costumes, in keeping with which she wilted or waxed impervious, flirted or fled” (ix). Dorcas, in her many costumes, is “infinitely malleable” to those around her, and similarly to Milkman and Helene, she succumbs to the ministrations and gazes of others and has little control over her body. Even after her death, Dorcas is associated with insubstantial, sterile items that both replace and define her. In an essay in *The New Negro*, Williams ponders the plight of black women in turn of the century America and maintains, “Though there is much that is sorrowful and [...] much that is romantic in a peculiar way in their history, none of it has yet been told as evidence of

what is possible for these women” (60). Dorcas’s death encapsulates Williams’s thoughts, and nothing in the portrayal of her “romantic” and “sorrowful” life and history has allowed her to have any future.

Before Dorcas’s death, when she and Felice arrive at the party, Dorcas is assessed by two brothers who physically analyze and then ultimately reject her, and she “has been acknowledged, appraised, and dismissed in the time it takes for a needle to find its opening groove” (67). The mention of a record and the use of the word “groove” foreshadow the narrator’s statements at the end of the novel, and the fact that Dorcas has been “acknowledged, appraised, and dismissed” is also indicative of her impending relationship with Joe. Joe begins an affair with Dorcas after first watching her eat a peppermint stick in a candy store, and then he inadvertently sees her again while delivering make-up to her aunt. Joe, too, like Violet, is looking for control and reconciliation. Just as Violet believes she has “chosen” Joe, part of Joe’s obsession with Dorcas is that he has “made up his mind” and “chosen” her (135). He believes there is something unifying and whole in the choice; a reconciliation of the multitude of selves he feels he has morphed in and out of, and the peppermint sticks he purchases, distributes, and eats throughout the day are a way to maintain an ongoing sensation of being with her. The ideas of choice and permanence are also reflected in his “deepdown, spooky” love that eventually makes him “so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going” (3). All of these feelings of attempted control and permanence stem from Joe’s orphanage as a child. Abandoned by Wild and an unknown father, Joe seeks stability, consistency, and something he can claim as his own. Through Dorcas, he tries to take ownership, as Hogue claims, “of a history from which he has

been involuntarily exiled” (para. 10, n.p.), and Badt maintains that Dorcas “inspires [...] the remembering of past histories” (572). All of this leads Joe to assess Dorcas, to become consumed by the “hoof marks” on her cheeks, and eventually to “hunt” her. As several critics have already noted, the “hunt” seems to be a re-enactment of Joe’s search for Wild.⁸ Brogan views such repetition as an instance of “traumatic memory” where “the past is seen and relived exactly as it was first experienced, without the filter of later interpretations” (79). As with all of his previous hunting excursions, Joe feels it is only “natural” to take along a gun, and as he “tracks” Dorcas through the City, he does not make a distinction between hunting experiences. Brogan further claims that “to release the future from the death grip of the past, the past must be revised” (80), and in the instance of Joe’s hunt for Dorcas, the past has indeed been altered. He is in the City, not the country, and while he never manages to find Wild, he succeeds in shooting Dorcas. Despite “revising” and “controlling” the past, however, Joe is still not able to function in the present. He has “acknowledged, appraised, and dismissed” Dorcas’s physical life, but he remains consumed by her after her death.

While the past may not be endlessly repeating itself, it is clear that Joe and Violet have not fully exorcised their demons, and rather than liberating them from the “groove”, Dorcas’s death has become yet another memory to haunt them. Andrews claims that the “legacy of Dorcas haunts Violet, Joe, and the text as a whole” (102). However, *Jazz* intertwines multiple stories that continuously interrupt one another, and it seems more accurate to view the “haunting” as mutual. Other characters not only view Dorcas as an object to be assessed and adorned, but they also allow their own histories to

⁸ Page, Andrews, and C. Jones all look in detail at the correlation between Dorcas and Wild.

affect their treatment of her: Violet both maims her “creamy” (5) face and fantasizes about cutting her hair, Joe tracks her as he tracked his mother, Alice bundles her body in layers of clothing, and Felice uses Dorcas’s perceived materialism to rationalize the loss of an heirloom. Ideas of a stifling past, of sterility, and of insubstantiality envelop Dorcas’s presence in *Jazz*. Despite being the focus of such attention, Dorcas’s own life and history appear merely as a footnote in a novel overwhelmed with others’ pasts, and her very story becomes one of rejection and abandonment. Orphaned, insubstantial, and shot, Dorcas is reworked, reshaped, reimagined, and eventually dismissed as narrator, characters, and readers begin to focus on the potential reconciliation between Violet and Joe at the end of the novel. However, even if Joe and Violet can come to terms with their haunted histories, the loss of a future is implied in the loss of a life, and it seems that Felice’s largely unnarrated story, ambiguously accompanied by her record purchases at the end of the novel, remains the only hope for a future in *Jazz*.

All That Glitters: The Distractions of False Epiphanies

Much like *Jazz*, where characters’ preoccupations with images from the past paralyze them, characters in *Song of Solomon* are distracted by insubstantial “glittery” objects, which lead to false senses of epiphany. “Glittered” objects denote characters’ individual fixations and are associated with greed, false flight, and abandonment. As characters submit to their distractions, they are frequently described as “glittering” or as exhibiting some sort of light. For instance, Freddie, one of Macon’s employees who also enjoys gossiping, has a gold tooth that gleams and “flashes” (109) each time he has new information to convey. When Guitar discusses race, his eyes contain “phosphorous” (116). When Ruth reminisces about her father, she is described as

conveying a “steady beam of love” (23), and she believes that being near his belongings “reignite[s] that cared-for feeling” (124). Her “shining lightish eyes” even “fix on him like magnets holding him from the narrow earth he longed for” (134). In an effort to maintain these feelings of love or obsession, Ruth transfers her attention to her son and breastfeeds him into adolescence. The sensation of breastfeeding allows Ruth to indulge in a “fantasy” world where her son’s lips “pull from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold” (13). Macon’s greed or obsession with money is illustrated almost stereotypically through a “shining” face, “licked lips,” and the act of rubbing his hands together (172). Additionally, his hatred of his wife “glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her” (10), and between Ruth and Macon, there exists a “brilliant bitterness” (126). The gleams, glitters, and sparkles only temporarily illuminate protagonists and frequently burden them. Characters are chained to fantasy, unreturned love, hatred, or material objects, all of which contribute to their failure to reach an epiphanic reconciliation. Driven by and obsessed with their own desires, they become incapable of seeing or becoming a part of the larger world around them. They fail to establish any lasting relationships with others where love and respect are reciprocated, and throughout the novel, they remain isolated individuals, constantly searching for the next temporary “sparkle.”

Hagar’s preoccupations, like Guitar, Freddie, Macon, and Ruth’s, are also described through images of light. These images, which illustrate a combination of the effects of love, obsession, and abandonment, are eventually shown to be sterile, and once Hagar is deprived of the false light she has pursued for so long, she dies. After Milkman sends her a Christmas card full of money, simultaneously ending their fourteen

year relationship and “thanking” her for it, Hagar goes “spinning into a bright blue place” (99). The “bright place” is “where everything was frozen except for an occasional burst of fire inside her chest that crackled away” (99). Illustrating a more extreme version of longing than the others, Hagar is literally being consumed by her desire for Milkman and by the pain of abandonment, and she begins to associate her entire body with the sensation:

[She found] peace nowhere and in nothing. [...] Not in the carved wax candle that the two of them made for her, Pilate dipping the wick and Reba scratching out tiny flowers with a nail file, and put in a genuine store-bought candle holder next to her bed. Not even the high fierce sun at noon, nor the ocean-dark evenings. Nothing could pull her mind away from the mouth Milkman was not kissing, the feet that were not running toward him, the eye that no longer beheld him, the hands that were not touching him. (127)

Images of light are intertwined with Hagar’s body, and no other light, including Pilate’s candle and even the sun, can compare to the “burst of fire” consuming her. The outside light cannot melt her “frozen” body, and the “ocean” of night is similarly unable to put out the fire. Much like the inhabitants of Ruby at the beginning of the chapter, whose “light” and “sparks” are continually fuelled by their addiction to the past until they cannot function without it, Hagar continues to “stalk” Milkman, eventually becoming unable to live without her “bursts” of fire (127).

Despite the language used to describe Hagar’s emotions, she appears “boring” to Milkman:

She was the third beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it’s there, because it can’t hurt, and because what difference does it make? (91)

Tiring of her easy availability and complete devotion, Milkman rejects Hagar and she becomes associated with a hunger and thirst that have little to do with desire and everything to do with convenience. Hagar is a commodity, she is consumed as easily as she consumes things, and after Milkman rejects her, she fails to see herself as anything other than object. Willis claims that Hagar even represents the “translation of human emotion into commodity” (“Funk” 38). When she is depressed after Milkman’s abandonment of her, Reba and Pilate “cooked special things for her; searched for gifts that would break the spell [...]. They brought her lipstick and chocolate milk, a pink nylon sweater and a fuchsia bed jacket. Reba even investigated jello, both red and green” (308). Food becomes another item to buy for Hagar, to convince her that she can consume and that she need not reduce herself to a lifeless object. Hagar, however, is unmoved by the food and gifts until she views herself in a compact given to her by Pilate. She decides it is her appearance that Milkman dislikes, and she embarks on a crazed shopping spree, purchasing “peachy powders and milky lotions” (311). The resemblance of her purchases to “milk” and “peaches” is not simply a reference to skin color, but it is an indication that her hunger extends beyond the foods with which Pilate and Reba try to placate her. Inflamed by Milkman’s rejection, Hagar tries to quell her appetite through the purchasing of body-obscuring objects, which at once make her invisible and visible, and Guerrero notes that she begins to turn herself into an “objectified spectacle worthy of male attention and romance” (769). The result of Hagar’s shopping spree is that her mind, rather than her body becomes altered, and much like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* or Sweetie and Arnette in *Paradise*, Hagar is soon beyond reconciliation.

At the end of her ill-fated shopping spree, Hagar's "box of Sunny Glow" falls into a puddle before immediately "explod[ing] in light peach puffs" (313-314). She believes she could "spend her life there [in the store] among the cut glass, shimmering in peaches and cream" (311), and once at home, she "pat[s] sunny glow all over her face" and puts "baby clear sky light to outwit the day light on her eyelids" (314), hoping that her preparations would "culminate in a beauty that would dazzle him" (313). The "peachy powders and milky lotions" (311), rather than quelling her appetite, have now acquired a "magical" quality, and Parker claims that the products Hagar buys are an attempt "to transform herself into a white woman" (630). As the make-up "explodes", "shimmers", and usurps natural light, it promises a hollow transformation, as Hagar tries, much like Violet, to hide her "ethnic identity." Dyer claims that "idealized white women are bathed in and permeated by light. It streams through them and falls onto them from above. In short, they glow" (122). The very names of the products Hagar buys encapsulate Dyer's statement. She attempts, through their application, to merge what she perceives is the "ideal" female with the image of herself in the compact. For Hagar, it is not enough simply to be surrounded by light, but she must find a way to become it.

Hagar tries to maintain and spread the momentum of her "fire," and it encompasses the objects around her as she consumes them and is consumed by them. As her whirlwind shopping spree ends, she is fully adorned in her purchases, and she "presents herself to Reba and Pilate" (314):

And it was in their eyes that she saw what she had not seen before in the mirror: the wet ripped hose, the soiled white dress, the sticky, lumpy face powder, the streaked rouge, and the wild wet shoals of hair. All this she

saw in their eyes, and the sight filled her own with water warmer and much older than the rain. Water that lasted for hours until the fever came, and then it stopped. The fever dried her eyes up as well as her mouth. (314)

As Hagar sees the reality of her “light” reflected in the eyes of Reba and Pilate, she drowns. Her awakening, her tears, and the fever simultaneously melt the ice and put out the fire in her chest, which had become the driving forces behind her existence. Hagar fails to achieve a reconciliation between emotion and commodity and between her sense of abandonment and potential future. She exists instead in a bright void of consumerism that cannot sustain itself. The fire that she had used to motivate and propel her has been put out, and the ice that lingered in its stead has been melted. Once she is bereft of her addiction and succumbs to the reality of abandonment, the withdrawal kills her, and she is consumed by the very real “fire” of fever.

Milkman too is surrounded by sparkle, glitz, and fire that not only involves Hagar’s addiction, the quest for gold, or his mother’s love, but that also includes the outlandishly recurring image of the peacock. It not only represents an inability to fly, but it gives the impression of false flight and a parallel is created between its heavy, decorated feathers and the greed, obsession, and desires that inhibit characters. From the beginning of the novel, readers are presented not with an image of flight, but with images of false, misinterpreted flight. The community’s insurance agent, Mr. Smith, who is also a member of the Seven Days, fashions “wide blue silk wings” and attempts to “fly” by leaping off of a building (5). The leap is accompanied by Pilate’s version of the “Song of Solomon” and by Milkman’s birth. Described by Pilate as “a little bird”, Milkman, as previously mentioned, becomes disinterested in the world when he learns

“that only birds and airplanes could fly” (9). The imagery surrounding Milkman’s birth, however, is ambiguous. Mr. Smith, as an early representation of the flightless, ostentatious peacock, cannot fly; however, Pilate’s song and terms of endearment convey a promise and heritage of flight. The conflicting ideas of potential and the threat of meaninglessness accompany Milkman throughout the novel. The first time Milkman sees the peacock is with Guitar:

“Look - she’s flying down.” Milkman felt again his unrestrained joy at anything that could fly. “Some jive flying, but look at her strut.” [...] “He. That’s a he. The male is the only one got that tail full of jewelry.” [...] “How come it can’t fly no better than a chicken?” Milkman asked. “Too much tail. All that jewelry weigh it down. Like vanity. Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.” (178-179)

The bird rekindles Milkman’s love of “anything that could fly”, and it indicates how intertwined the notion of flight is with Milkman’s life; however, the peacock also comes to embody greed, and rather than permitting a focus on real flight, the peacock instead offers a distraction from it. After Guitar and Milkman see the peacock, they do not realize that “the bird had set them up”, and “they begin to fantasize about what [...] gold could buy when it became legal tender” (179).

Before robbing Pilate of her bag of bones, the conversation with Guitar continues, and Milkman experiences a false transformation:

Milkman’s eyes opened wide. He tried hard not to swallow, but the clarion call in Guitar’s voice filled his mouth with salt. The same salt that lay in the bottom of the sea and in the sweat of a horse’s neck. A taste so powerful and necessary that stallions galloped miles and days for it. It was new, it was delicious, it was his own. All the tentativeness, doubt, and inauthenticity that plagued him slithered away without a trace, a sound. (183)

Milkman's senses begin to merge and overwhelm him; his taste is not merely heightened, but focused on money. His eyes can only see the gold for which he and Guitar are scheming, and his sense of a new self is false as he succumbs to Guitar's "clarion call." He temporarily abandons his love of flight and becomes grounded in images of horses and the sea. The "inauthenticity" of Milkman's experience is solidified at the end of his conversation with Guitar, as "far down the road [...] the peacock spread its tail" (184). Milkman initially seeks substance in a quest for gold that does not exist, and he is distracted by false promises of escape. The image of the peacock and the false epiphany follow him on his journey to Danville, where "the airplane ride exhilarated him, encouraged illusion and [...] intricate metal became glistening bird" (220). "The salt taste" is also "back in his mouth", and "he smelled money" that is "like candy and sex and soft twinkling lights" (250-251). If flight is already an ambiguous concept in *Song of Solomon*, then the representation of false flight, furthers the potential for insubstantiality, or as Awkward claims, it "divests the narrative of its essential communal impulses" (484). By negating "communal impulses", the glitter of false flight emphasizes the selfishness of the individual and is a reminder that Jake, Ryna, and twenty one children were left behind. The peacock presents an image of flight that is sterile, imaginary, and contradictory. It serves to dilute the ideas of transcendence and liberation that seem to be attributed to flight, and it reminds readers of the slavery, death, and abandonment associated with it.

The peacock's association with "jewelry", selfishness, and abandonment is also evident in the story of Macon's discovery of gold after killing the white man. As Macon unearths the gold, "life, safety, and luxury fanned out before him like the tail-spread of a

peacock, and as he stood there trying to distinguish each delicious color, he saw the dusty boots of his father standing just on the other side of the shallow pit” (170). Rather than inspirations, the gold and the peacock are distractions, and Macon turns away from his father to concentrate on wealth. The image of the peacock marks the division in Pilate and Macon’s relationship as Pilate ignores the gold and searches for her father, and it sharply divides the differences in what they perceive their inheritances to be. Morrison claims in “The Family Came First” that “another manifestation of the priority of the family is that blacks repeatedly chose collectivism based on kinship over ‘individualistic opportunity’” (11). Morrison’s statement clearly separates material from familial priorities. In the cave, surrounded by images of insubstantiality, Macon chooses a family-less future, which eventually manifests itself in his disdain for Ruth and in his attempts to abort Milkman. Pilate, on the other hand, chooses to indulge in family in both the past and the present, and her future remains unadorned and unglittered as she becomes the only character in the novel capable of achieving epiphany.

Pilate stands in stark contrast to the other members of the Dead family and is truly an anomaly. She is born but has no belly button, she sells wine but does not drink, she constantly chews but is not necessarily eating, she laughs but never smiles (149), and perhaps out of all of the characters in the novel, she has been abandoned or rejected by the most people. Her mother dies before giving birth to her, leaving Pilate to “come struggling out of the womb without help [...], dragging her afterbirth behind her” (27-28). Pilate’s father is then shot, Macon abandons her after the quarrel in the cave, and as an adult she becomes “further isolated from people” when they learn she has no navel (148). However, once Pilate “realized what her situation in the world was and would

probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero” (149). Pilate turns her abandonment and her body into assets that allow her to live freely, or as T. Harris claims, to practice “a philosophy of wholeness” (94), and she achieves an “equilibrium” that “overshadow[s] all her eccentricities” (*Song of Solomon* 138). Essentially, Pilate not only gives birth to herself, but she creates her own epiphany.

Pilate’s self-sufficient journey also involves giving birth to one daughter and learning how to feed herself and others. When Pilate and Macon are first orphaned, they flee to neighboring Circe who, unbeknownst to them, works for the white people that killed their father:

Pilate began to cry the day Circe brought her white toast and cherry jam for breakfast. She wanted her own cherries, from her own cherry tree, with stems and seeds; not some too-sweet mashed mush. She thought she would die if she couldn’t hold her mouth under Ulysses S. Grant’s teat and squirt the warm milk into her mouth, or pull a tomato off its vine and eat it where she stood. Craving certain specific foods had almost devastated her. (167)

Jacqueline Jones states, “The political consequences of black woman’s family duties became dramatically apparent when slave cooks stole food from the master’s kitchens to feed hungry runaways” (4). Jones maintains that feeding became a way to establish bonds of kinship, and while Pilate rejects the sugary, processed food from the white man’s table, Circe is still able to convey notions of family and loyalty amidst the violence, abandonment, and malnourishment. Pilate exhibits the same independence in eating as she does in all other areas of her life. Food becomes an expression of that independence, of her free-thinking, and of her relationships with others. As she grows older, Pilate retains the idea that loyalty and family ties can be illustrated through food,

and on her own terms, she expresses her love for Reba and Hagar by permitting them the independence in food choice she was previously denied:

She and her daughters ate like children. Whatever they had a taste for. No meal was ever planned or balanced or served. Nor was there any gathering at the table. Pilate might bake hot bread and each one of them would eat it with butter whenever she felt like it. [...] They ate what they had or came across or had a craving for. (29)

Pilate's attempts to nourish are mingled with ideas of independence, loyalty, and family and even Macon, when he reminisces to Milkman about his childhood, fondly remembers that "'Pilate tried to make [him] a cherry pie once'" (51). She also later feeds Milkman his first "perfect" soft-boiled egg (209). Pilate tries to assuage hunger, she tries to establish bonds of kinship through eating, and food, family, and freedom become inextricably linked.

Later, Pilate not only provides the ingredients necessary for Milkman's conception, but she also tries to quell Ruth's morning sickness. First offering Ruth peaches that only increase her nausea, Pilate then sends "Reba to the store for a box of Argo corn starch" (131). Relieved by its texture, Ruth continues to eat "crunchy" things throughout her pregnancy, to which Pilate states, "'When you expectin, you have to eat what the baby craves [...] 'less it come in the world hongry for what you denied it'" (132). Again, Pilate's beliefs arise from a sense of responsibility to one's family and from desires to promote happiness and independence. Ironically, despite Pilate's efforts, Hagar claims that "'some of [her] days were hungry ones'" (48). Hagar's materialistic cravings are foreign to her grandmother, and even as Pilate tries to assuage them, Hagar proves insatiable. While Guitar, Milkman, and Ruth claim that Hagar is "spoiled", it seems that her hunger can be defined in terms of what she has been "denied." She wants

for no physical object, but Hagar is “denied” the knowledge of rejection and abandonment. In terms of her granddaughter, Pilate’s strong sense of family obligation seems to have worked against her, as Hagar is unable to cope with Milkman’s rejection.

Pilate’s inability to help Hagar brings into question the possibility of a future. Quoting Hortense Powdermaker, J. Jones states, ““the greater optimism of the [black] woman [in comparison to the black man] relates to their identification with their children both as cause and effect. The children carry them ahead into a future where more may be possible, and the future seems more promising, more important, more worth struggling for, because of the children”” (222). Powdermaker, as Jones notes, believes that optimism for the future is spurred through one’s children. By the end of *Song of Solomon*, however, not only can the Dead family no longer reproduce, but Pilate gets shot, Hagar is dead, and Milkman plummets off of a cliff, entangled with Guitar. Regardless whether Milkman plummets or manages to fly, the same sterile images that accompany him all his life are present in his final actions. He “leaps” as “fleet and bright as a lodestar [and] wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it” (337). Milkman’s jump is entangled in images of insubstantiality through the use of the word “bright”, through the sterile presence of death, “killing”, and the Seven Days, and through the sensation that he is further immersing himself in his past. Mentioning Solomon indicates that Milkman has chosen, like his great-grandfather and father before him, to leave his family. He ignores Pilate’s deathbed request to ““watch Reba”” (336), and he forgets her assertion that ““you can’t just fly off and leave a body”” (332). Milkman’s leap, like

Solomon's flight, is one of abandonment; Reba is left alone, and Pilate's body remains unburied. In death, however, Pilate achieves reconciliation by flying "without ever leaving the ground" (336), and she has finally merged her past with her present by burying her father. But, even if Pilate has managed to achieve her own reconciliation, Morrison leaves readers with the stark realization that in the Dead family, there will be no new generation of children to "pass on" Pilate's song.

Afterword: *A Mercy*

In *A Mercy*, Jacob Vaark states, “‘What a man leaves behind is what a man is’” (87). While Jacob does not “leave behind” twenty-one children like Milkman’s great-grandfather in *Song of Solomon*, he does leave behind an extravagant, partially finished house in the middle of the wilderness along with “three unmastered women and an infant [...] belonging to no one [and...] wild prey for anyone” (56). True to Toni Morrison’s words quoted in the introduction, she “writes about the same thing, which is how people relate to one another and miss [love] or hang onto it” (Bakerman 40). In *A Mercy*, Morrison’s preoccupations are succinctly conveyed and similar to those discussed in the previous chapters. Rebekka, Jacob’s wife is left behind, and much like the shrinking generations of *Paradise*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Jazz* before her, Rebekka’s children all die, and “three dead infants followed by the accidental death of [her daughter] Patrician unleavened her” (19). The legacy, then, that Jacob leaves behind includes not only his house but a group of women who become increasingly isolated from one another.

The women are brought to Jacob’s farm in the 1690s American wilderness. Like Mr. Cosey before him, Jacob is dead from the beginning of the novel, and the small group of women are left alone on his property after his death. The women consist of Rebekka, who is sold to him in marriage by her parents, and Lina, an orphaned Native American he has obtained through trade. There is also Sorrow, an unnamed, shipwrecked, and abandoned girl who now belongs to Jacob, as well as Florens, given to him by a Portuguese slaver as repayment of a debt. Frykholm notes in a review of *A Mercy* that not only have “each of these women faced some sort of abandonment or

exile” but that the novel consists of “far more people [who] are conscripts or orphans than are heroes, pilgrims, or pioneers” (46). Morrison continues the trend of her earlier novels by depicting alienated, abandoned, and isolated individuals. In *A Mercy*, however, the women who Jacob obtains are not only orphaned once, but when Jacob dies, it is apparent that they feel re-orphaned and again become displaced. Two indentured servants, Will and Scully, also periodically visit or carry out work on the farm, and Jacob, who repeatedly claims that “flesh was not his commodity” (20), has in fact, begun to participate in the early American slave trade on a very personal level. As the novel and Jacob’s posthumous story continue, he begins to finance the building of his new house through investments in the burgeoning rum industry, reliant on slave labor for profits.

Frykholm claims that the small group of orphaned protagonists “form a fragile, involuntary community” (46), and Babb, who writes on *A Mercy* in her article “E Pluribus Unum”, similarly states that “together these characters constitute a community” (149). However, the Vaark farm does not simply contain a group of “fragile” individuals who bond together in their loneliness and isolation. They are, rather, more similar to *Paradise*’s Ruby or Haven. The women who remain after Jacob’s death appear reliant on one another as they forge a home and a life together out of untrammelled wilderness, but it soon becomes clear that their unity, much like Ruby’s, is fabricated. Rebekka and Lina also initially seem to have a friendship similar to Alice’s and Violet’s in *Jazz*, brought together in an unknown and foreign environment, bereft of family and children, but they lose their friendship after Jacob’s death and revert to being slave and mistress. It is also disclosed that Lina, whose subversive authority on the farm

as second-in-command is similar to L's position in *Love*, has possibly killed Sorrow's firstborn child. After Jacob's death, the tensions between all the women are heightened, and Rebekka tries to sell Florens. The forced "community" of white, black, and Native American slave women, much like the Oven in *Paradise*, loses its already skewed foundations as death and wilderness divide them.

Again similarly to *Paradise*, food in *A Mercy* is also shown to be controversial.

Before trading for Florens, Jacob is invited to the slaver's house for dinner:

Dinner was a tedious affair made intolerable by the awkwardness Jacob felt. [...] His normally deft fingers turned clumsy with tableware. [...] Jacob pressed down his annoyance and chose to focus on the food. But his considerable hunger shrank when presented with the heavily seasoned dishes: everything except pickles and radishes was fried or overcooked, the wine, watered and too sweet for his taste, disappointed him and the company got worse. (15)

The meal initially exacerbates Jacob's dislike of the slaver and his lifestyle. It does nothing to assuage his hunger, and much like Margaret in *Tar Baby*, Jacob temporarily cannot handle the silverware. Rather than providing sustenance after Jacob's journey to the house, the meal only causes discord and unrest. Tension increases further as the Protestant Jacob watches the Catholic D'Ortega cross themselves during the blessing before the meal. Morrison's portrayal of dinner allows food to become intertwined with slavery, religion, and trade, and it eventually convinces Jacob to take Florens. He notes that "the only relief [to the dining experience], if minor, came from the clove-smelling woman who brought the food" (18). Jacob's disgust with D'Ortega is lessened when Florens's mother enters the room, and when he later sees her with her daughter outside, he again feels relieved. The anxiety associated with food soon returns, though, when "Jacob felt his stomach seize. The tobacco odor, so welcoming when he arrived, now

nauseated him. Or was it the sugared rice, the hog cuts fried and dripping with molasses, the cocoa Lady D'Ortega was giddy about?" (20). Despite Jacob's initial disgust and nausea that is spurred by the tobacco, sugar, and chocolate products of human exploitation, it is over another meal, eaten soon afterwards, that he decides to invest in rum and slavery (27). The two meals illustrate Jacob's steady decline into greed and immorality. They also depict his conflicting emotions over slavery and his desires to be as carelessly wealthy as D'Ortega.

While Jacob is at D'Ortega's plantation viewing the slaves after dinner, he notices that D'Ortega remains "silent about the scars" (20) on the bodies of his slaves. The underlying violence inherent in slavery is noted and then ignored. Writing about *Beloved*, Cynthia Dobbs notes, "For while scars serve to mark each body as singular – literally indicating each body's difference – these scars also foreground an insistent collective history of slavery. Because scarred bodies are literally marked with the violent history of their past, this past cannot be forgotten" (575). Dobbs's statement demonstrates some of the many functions of scars: they depict pain, the individual, and the community, and they serve as a physical record of the past. As in *Sula* and *Love*, pain adopts its own form on the body and in the eyes of the beholder. It also illustrates a progression as it filters from the dominant white society to the slave community and the individual. However, while scars and pain might initially record a story, they are largely ignored by characters in *A Mercy*, and Jacob's observation is unvoiced. The absence of a description lends a feeling of forgetfulness and temporality, as though the memory of such people and such events are already beginning to fade. There is also a physicality

inherent in scarring that causes the memory of it to potentially last only as long as the body that houses it.

The responsibility, however, of recording pain, scarring, abandonment, and even malnutrition in the novel falls to Florens. When her mother persuades Jacob to take her, Florens is unaware that it is for her own protection and believes she is being abandoned in favor of her baby brother. The sense of abandonment repeats itself, not just at Jacob's death, but after Florens is rejected by a free blacksmith with whom she has an affair. He too chooses a little boy in his care instead of her, and he tells Florens that she has made herself a slave because her "head is empty and [her] body is wild" and that she must "own herself" (139). By the end of the novel, Florens enters a room in Jacob's new, unused, and abandoned house, and begins to record the story of her abandonment on its walls and floorboards. In an interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison claims:

When I write [...] I have to feel as if it's being done in a very separate womb of my own construction. Wholly free. And because it's the only activity of all that I engage in wholly for myself. It's the one place that I can't have any other interference. (23)

Florens, just like Morrison, creates her own space in which to write. She too is in a "womb", reliving and releasing the pain she feels from her mother's and the blacksmith's abandonment. She is never interrupted, and she reaches a final, redemptive conclusion claiming, "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last" (159). Florens's epiphany of self-definition and determination has allowed her to express and purge her pain, and it has also, in a sense, enabled history to be preserved.

Through Florens's epiphany, *A Mercy* temporarily begins to diverge from Morrison's earlier novels. By recording and attempting to make sense of the chaotic events of her life, Florens's epiphany appears Modernist. She tries to render meaning from events, she has become an artist, and she is her own authorial voice. Bowen, however, as noted in the introduction, comments that "epiphany may be false because the meaning of experience, when transformed by either the artist's perceptions or the perceptions of less gifted characters may in fact be self-delusion" (106). Florens's knowledge of her past and of her relationship with her mother is fragmented and incomplete. Her epiphany is liberating, but her narrative only records and transmits a partial truth. Truth becomes subjective and miscommunicated, both in Florens's mother's inability to tell her own story and in Florens's inability to share with another the words she has carved across the walls and floorboards. The epiphany Florens has experienced, despite her ability to release her pain, then becomes questionably Post-modernist as her understanding of her own past is flawed.

Both Florens's epiphany and the final chapter of *A Mercy*, which is narrated by her mother, call into question the reliability of the written word and present complications for the whole of the novel. The scars of Florens's healing are entangled with those of her mother's "open wound", and the novel then ends, not with Florens's redemption, but with her mother's previously unknown story. While Florens's pain is released, her mother's is still rife, and she claims, "To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (161). C. Henderson notes "the dual functionality of scars as simultaneously signs of wounding and signs of healing" (7). The artist or historian is shown to be the recorder of a partial

and subjective truth that is fragile, incommunicable, and Post-modernist. The power of words, epiphanies, and experiences is also shown to be deeply personal, and Morrison once again calls into question one's ability to be "representative of the tribe and in it" (*Margin* 56). Overall, in *A Mercy*, Morrison portrays a group of disconnected individuals who, despite their mutual hardships in the wilderness, cannot form enough of a community to "survive whole." The narrative, then, does not end on a final note of complete liberation, but it becomes, rather, an unsettling origins story of a country that seemingly has never "permitted harmony."

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